FourFourTwo

FOOTBALL LEAGUE TOP 50 PLAYERS
p32

TED LASSO RETURNS!

MARCUS RASHFORD

He's back - and he's even better than ever

100 YEARS OF WEMBLEY

Hurst, horses and Higuita

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WELCOME

The year 2020 was a strange one for everyone across the globe – a pandemic sweeping across the world, countries being plunged into lockdown, life grinding to a halt.

The immediate future was bleak and uncertain. School PE lessons were led by Joe Wicks, while a 99-year-old walked around his garden to raise money for the NHS.

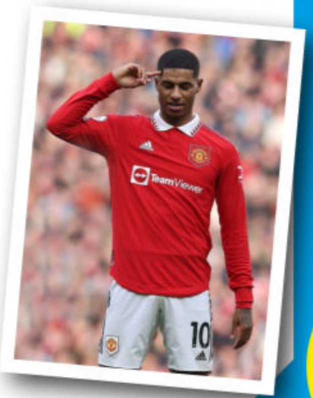
Then there was Marcus Rashford, a young footballer from a working class Manchester background who was a regular on the back pages, but crossed over to the front pages after taking a stand. With schools shut, children couldn't access any free meals – Rashford challenged the government and was rightfully lauded for his efforts.

Now, following a difficult period on the pitch, the England forward is in the form of his life and has guided Manchester United back into the winners' circle. In this issue, we take a look at his remarkable recovery.

If Rashford is inspirational in the real world, so Ted Lasso is in a fictional one. With the award-winning sitcom's third season now airing, we meet those behind a football show done well.

Elsewhere, we present our annual rundown of the Football League's top 50 players, voted for by YOU. As ever, it was hotly contested...

Enjoy the mag.



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5 THINGS YOU'LL LEARN INSIDE

1 Which club invited local prisoners to watch a game to boost gates

2 Who was once fined after overtaking Fergie on a public road

3 Which club owner was threatened with a severed pig's head

4 Which League Two star also used to be a beach soccer international

5 Who escaped via a window to play in a 9-3 thrashing at Wembley

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THE TOP 50 FOOTBALL LEAGUE PLAYERS

AS VOTED BY THE FANS

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YOU ASK THE QUESTIONS

Interview Daniele Verri

"Critics pushed me to prove them all wrong. Thankfully, I was born a metre *onside*, otherwise I would not have scored most of my goals"

PIPPO INZAGHI

The moment you hear Pippo Inzaghi's name, you half expect a slim 5ft 11in bundle of sleek black curtains to nip in front of you and score a near-post tap-in. Or be flagged for making his move a fraction too soon.

Sir Alex Ferguson's infamous "born offside" quip about Filippo Inzaghi's modus operandi has stuck, but there was so much more in the Italian striker's armoury, however true the kernel of Fergie's sentiment. He had blistering acceleration, game-reading intelligence and an unerring ability to finish with either foot, or his head, all of which marked him as the last of a dying breed of poachers who lived on the shoulder of the defender.

He didn't track back. He didn't have the smoothest technique, nor the work rate of those tireless multi-functional forwards who dominate the modern game. All Inzaghi did was score goals – by the bucketload. Some, even the great Johan Cruyff, derided him as selfish, lucky and limited, but you don't bag 313 career goals without knowing where the net is, at least. Only six Italians in history have notched more; none have scored more than he in the European Cup or Champions League.

Inzaghi struck 70 times in European competitions for Parma, Juventus and Milan, his typically opportunistic brace in the 2007 final against Liverpool securing a second Champions League trophy with the latter (right). For many years, he fought with Real Madrid legend Raul to be UEFA's most prolific marksman, prior to Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi dwarfing them both.

When the arch-predator retired in 2012, aged 38, he had won 12 major honours as a player, including the 2006 World Cup with Italy. Naturally, he signed off by scoring the winner in a 2-1 victory over Novara. With Pippo, Clarence Seedorf, Alessandro Nesta, Rino Gattuso and Gianluca Zambrotta all playing their final match for Milan together, Inzaghi beat the offside trap and latched onto a smart Seedorf pass to finish emphatically – and tearfully.

Having moved straight into coaching Milan's youth teams, his first senior managerial role was a baptism of fire, replacing Seedorf at a Rossoneri side in transition. Since that single season, the poacher-turned-gamekeeper has won promotion with Venezia and Benevento either side of stints at Bologna and Brescia, before taking charge of Serie B Reggina last summer. Standing in the way of Reggina's first top-flight season since 2008-09 are two clubs managed by Inzaghi's old Azzurri team-mates, in Alberto Gilardino's Genoa and Fabio Grosso's Frosinone, although he tells us that, "Expectations are high after a very good first half of the campaign".

The humble, smiling 49-year-old sat in front of *FFT* can't wait to revisit his own incredible career today. It begins with his childhood exploits in Piacenza, northern Italy, alongside younger brother Simone, now managing Inter...

What are your earliest memories of football?
Paolo Pisari, via email

Back in my day, you would learn your skills on the street, playing with your friends and using rucksacks as posts. You don't see anyone doing it now – they all play PlayStation or spend time on Instagram. My brother and I used to go fishing, pick mushrooms in the afternoon or play football with our friends. I would record games on VHS tapes to watch when I got home. We would go hiking; spend time together outside, as a group. Technology has brought many advantages, but it has also taken away the pleasure of kids playing football on the streets. On holiday last summer, I saw a road sign saying, 'It's forbidden to play football'. I almost had a heart attack. And when we go out for dinner, everyone stares at their mobile phones. Me too, I must admit – the other day I had no access to my phone for a few hours and I was going absolutely mad!

You were one of the great poachers, but do you have a favourite goal of yours scored from outside the box?
Danny Powers, via Twitter

[*Laughs*] I didn't score many, but I do remember one: a free-kick for Atalanta [left] in a November 1996 defeat at Bologna. I was Serie A top scorer that season with 24 goals; I had a special relationship with manager Emiliano Mondonico and also had the help of penalties and free-kicks. As my career went on, other players took set-pieces – that year, I scored from all over the pitch! Plus I recall a nice bicycle kick in the 1998-99 Champions League, from the penalty spot for Juventus against Galatasaray. That was a brilliant goal.

Joining Juve in 1997, what was it like in a dressing room featuring Antonio Conte, Alessandro Del Piero, Zinedine Zidane and Didier Deschamps?
Jade Craddock, Worcestershire

I was still a boy, really – just 23, with only that one good Serie A season for ▸

TEAMS (PLAYER)
1991-95 Piacenza
1992-93 Leffe (loan)
1993-94 Hellas Verona (loan)
1995-96 Parma
1996-97 Atalanta
1997-2001 Juventus
2001-12 Milan

COUNTRY (PLAYER)
1997-2007 Italy

TEAMS (MANAGER)
2012-14 Milan Primavera
2014-15 Milan
2016-18 Venezia
2018-19 Bologna
2019-21 Benevento
2021-22 Brescia
2022- Reggina

Atalanta behind me. I was talented but finding my way as a player. When I first met Didier Deschamps, Antonio Conte and Alessandro Del Piero, I felt I had to stand on tiptoes as I had so much respect for them.

What caused the friction between you and Del Piero?
Gerard Lezama, via Facebook
Alessandro and I never really had any problems. That whole story goes back to a famous match against Venezia in February 2000: I scored a hat-trick, and for my second I could've squared the ball to him. That's a typical Italian paradox: a striker scores three and he gets criticised for not passing the ball. I became tired of being criticised all the time; I was scoring 25 to 30 goals every season, but people kept saying I was too egoistic. That had nothing to do with Del Piero, though.

What made you join Milan in 2001?
Nicola Valentini, Naples
[President] Silvio Berlusconi and [chief executive] Adriano Galliani were keen, and the idea of wearing the Rossoneri shirt intrigued me. Playing at San Siro was always very emotional, even as an opponent. When I announced I would leave Juventus, countless fans tried to convince me to stay, but I was 28 and thought it was the right time to move on. I was an idol at Juventus – in my first season there, I scored a brace on my debut in the Supercoppa Italiana and a hat-trick on the day we won the league title, beating Bologna 3-2. We also reached the Champions League final, which we lost 1-0 to Real Madrid. I knew I would have to start afresh at Milan, but taking on new challenges was always the secret to my career.

What do you remember most about winning the Champions League with Milan in 2002-03?
James Bright, Birmingham
I always have to remind people that 2002-03 was my greatest European season, because all they speak about is my brace in the 2007 final against Liverpool. I scored six goals in 2006-07 – half of my total in winning my first Champions League medal. I scored in both legs of qualifying and went on to score 12 that campaign, but because I didn't score in the semis or the final, everyone rightly relates 2003 to Andriy Shevchenko's winning penalty in the shootout against my former club, Juve.

Which of your Milan derby goals did you most enjoy?
Alistair Reynolds, Dumbarton
I'll always remember my first Derby della Madonnina goal: a header past Francesco Toldo in October 2001. That was my first derby and we won 4-2 – you can't forget your first Milan derby! A year later, I scored the only goal in a 1-0 victory, in front of all our fans. That moment will stay with me forever.

Just how agonising was it to watch Liverpool's comeback in the 2005 Champions League Final, while you were in the stands?
Giuseppe Rinaldi, Milan
I'd suffered a knee injury, so wasn't in the matchday squad for Istanbul, but I was at the stadium and I remember that my team-mates played a superb game. I went to the dressing room at half-time – the atmosphere was tense, and Carlo Ancelotti was desperate to remind everyone that it wasn't over yet. No one was already celebrating, as I have often read here and there. Those of us sat in the stands wore a celebratory T-shirt underneath, but the players going back on to the pitch didn't know anything about that.

We played at our best in that final – better than in any other and definitely way better than in Athens two years later – but that six-minute blackout in the second half cost us the trophy. From then on, it all went wrong. Andriy Shevchenko had a massive double chance with a couple of minutes to go – normally it's impossible to save such a shot, but somehow Jerzy Dudek did. I couldn't help my team-mates avoid defeat that night, and nor could I two years earlier in the Intercontinental Cup loss against Boca Juniors in Japan; I only played a few minutes and wasn't at my top level. That was frustrating.

How did you and Milan channel the disappointment from 2005 into the Athens final in 2007?
Nathan Gent, via Facebook
It wasn't just the Champions League – thankfully, destiny soon offered me the chance to repeat those final losses to Liverpool and Boca Juniors in 2007. In Athens I wasn't 100 per cent, but I was fully fit in Yokohama for the Club World Cup final and scored a brace in both matches. I played an important role in winning that Champions League: my goals helped us to beat Red Star

Clockwise from below
Juventus: pretty good at football; unfortunately, Pippo wasn't the only wannabe Azzurri No.9; back when the kid from *Malcolm In The Middle* was a mascot; a classic pose after many a goal; a Greek revenge play in 2007; "Argh, my knees!"

ITALIA
ITALIA
ITALIA

SONY MiniDisc

> “MY BEST CHAMPIONS LEAGUE SEASON WAS 2002-03, EVEN WITH THAT FINAL IN 2007”

Belgrade in qualifying in the first place, then my second against Liverpool in the final probably describes me best. I hid right on the offside line as Jamie Carragher made a move forward, then I received the ball, dribbled around the onrushing Pepe Reina and slid the ball into the net.

Having played alongside Del Piero, Shevchenko, Ronaldo, Christian Vieri, Zlatan Ibrahimovic and more, who was your favourite strike partner?
Fawwaz Nasarudin, via Facebook
I played with many great players and was comfortable alongside them all – if I had to choose, I’d go for Vieri with Italy and Kaka at club level. Vieri and I are still close friends. As players, we complemented each other well and it’s a pity we didn’t play together more often. One game that sticks out in my mind was against Wales in Euro 2004 qualifying: we won 4-0 and I scored a hat-trick. I still can’t understand why two strikers like us wouldn’t play regularly together – we were normally forced to alternate, which upset both of us. And when I think of Kaka, I think of those three finals we played and won together in 2007: the Champions League, the Club World Cup and the UEFA Super Cup against Sevilla. I got five goals in three games, and most of them were assisted by him.

Do you have any memories of Milan’s 2-2 draw with Portsmouth at Fratton Park in the 2008-09 UEFA Cup?
@shoedoggydogg, via Twitter
I remember that game well, because I scored while wearing the captain’s armband. Believe it or not, I still have a picture on my bedside table! I wore the Milan armband for one night only [after Gattuso was substituted], or at least very rarely. We went 2-0 down in the second half and I scored a late equaliser as we reached the knockout stages. It was a typical and beautiful English atmosphere – it rained buckets that night. Gianluca Zambrotta kicked a long, very high ball into the box and I brought it down and shot past the goalkeeper. I ran to the Milan fans, who were always so close to pitchside in English stadia. It was an unforgettable evening for me.

I’ve always thought Italy’s squad at France 98 squad was amazing. Could that team have gone all the way?
emiliomartinezbaniela, via Instagram
Both Italy squads in 1998 and 2002 were exceptional – even stronger than the one that won the 2006 World Cup. In France, against the hosts, Luigi Di Biagio hit the bar from the penalty spot in the quarter-final shootout; in 2002, referee Byron Moreno forced us out of the World Cup [controversially ruling out an extra-time Golden Goal against co-hosts South Korea]. In both cases, it was more about the fruit of chance than our own negligence.

Were you disappointed not to play more in the victorious 2006 World Cup campaign?
nickkelsall, via Instagram
I’d love to have played a little bit more. I came off the bench to score against the Czech Republic in the group stage; I was fit, but there wasn’t much space for me and they were my only minutes. Having said that, though, I tried to help the squad in other ways, off the pitch. I’m very happy for what we achieved and proud of having won a World Cup with my team-mates. The Calciopoli scandal played a crucial role that year – something switched in every player’s mind. We also had the necessary bit of luck, as we’d played a relatively simple tournament until we took on the hosts, Germany, in the semi-finals.

You played with some great creators for both club and country. Who’d you have the best understanding with?
Joe Rawlings, via Twitter
I developed a fantastic understanding with Francesco Totti. He was a massive footballer, always playing one-touch. After the 1998 World Cup, he tried his best to lure me to Roma, but I was still happy at Juventus.

Who was the toughest defender you ever faced?
Darren Morgan, via Twitter
There were so many, especially during the 1990s! Coming up against former team-mates Fabio Cannavaro, Lilian Thuram and Roberto Sensini after I’d left Parma was challenging, and facing Milan’s Alessandro Costacurta and Paolo Maldini when I was at Juve was very difficult. Then, when I’d moved to the Rossoneri, Inter had some really tough guys in the city derby, such as Walter Samuel, Marco Materazzi and

▶

INZAGHI
9
ENS FINAL 20

PHOTO
PHOTO

Clockwise from above Pippo landed the dream job straight away; "I'll take that now, thanks"; Inzaghi vs Inzaghi: pick your fighter; you can't copy Carlo, says Pippo; Reggina are pushing for promotion this season

Ivan Cordoba. Sinisa Mihajlovic, Jaap Stam and Fernando Couto played at Lazio. I'm sure I've forgotten some, too! It was difficult to be a frontman and score goals in Serie A at that time.

Did you have the chance to play for an English club during your career?
Greg Morter, via Facebook
I was always happy in Italy, as Serie A was the top league in Europe back in my day – all of the best players would come to us. Playing in Italy also meant that my family was always somewhere close by, which was important to me. But, in 2012, at the end of my career, I did have an offer from Watford in the Championship, where the coach was Gianfranco Zola. I'd have loved that experience, learning a new language and culture, but in the end it didn't work out for small details that I can't even remember, so I decided to retire. It's a pity it didn't happen.

Sir Alex Ferguson said, "That lad must have been born offside" about you – are you aware of this quote?
Muhammad Dahlan, via Facebook
Yeah, I know about it, and thankfully I was born a metre *onside*, otherwise I wouldn't have scored most of my goals! [*Laughs*] Joking aside, playing on the verge of offside was my typical characteristic; something I'd look to take advantage of. I tried to hide on the offside line and attack from there. It's not easy to teach – it has to come naturally. I played many times against Sir Alex's Manchester United, though we never spoke about this in person.

I've received many compliments as well as criticisms throughout my career. I was used to them and never let them bother me too much either way. If you don't score in big games, someone will moan that you're not a decisive striker; if your technique isn't perfect, people will say that you aren't skilful enough. I scored more than 300 professional goals – I knew what I could give and I'm happy with what I've achieved in football. Critics always pushed me to be better and prove them all wrong. I was aware of my qualities and knew what I could do with the right attitude.

Johan Cruyff once said, "The thing about Inzaghi is that he can't actually play football at all – he's just always in the right position." Did those comments upset you?
Jonathan Mitchell, via Twitter
I know that quote as well. He was an immense footballer, but I don't really know what he meant by the comment. I always knew I wasn't a striker who would dribble past people in elegant fashion and play backheeled passes, but I knew how to score. Everyone has their own skills, and scoring is pivotal for any striker. I prefer to remember what my former Atalanta manager, Emiliano Mondonico, said about me: "Inzaghi is not in love with goals – it's goals that are in love with Inzaghi."

Would you survive in today's game, with VAR ruling out goals scored by players in offside positions?
Darragh Martin, via Facebook
I'm in favour of technology if used for clear mistakes. I don't especially like it as a slow-motion tool, but if it protects referees, who are only human and can make errors, then of course I welcome its implementation. Being a linesman is very complicated. In my day, a great number of decisions were on instinct. Against Mexico at the 2002 World Cup, a linesman put his flag up to disallow a goal of mine although I was definitely onside. I guess VAR probably would've disallowed some of the goals I scored and given me some that got ruled out.

After your brilliant playing career with Milan, expectations were bound to be massive when you became the manager in 2014. What went wrong?
Keeng David Dee VII, via Facebook
It was such a difficult period for Milan, which stretched on into the following years as well. I was coaching the club's youth team and loved working with all of the youngsters, but suddenly the opportunity arose. If the Rossoneri call, you can't refuse. It didn't work out too well and I was really sad, especially for our fans who had great expectations of me in charge. It wasn't easy to leave the San Siro dugout in 2015 after just one season, in which we finished 10th. However, it was a decisive year for me as a person, as it helped me to grow through the difficulties and convinced me that being a coach was something I wanted 100 per cent.

How much has Milan changed since your playing days?
charlykay99, via Instagram
The club started to spend a lot more money on signings, but results didn't improve much. It was a transitional, complicated spell for the Rossoneri: we'd lost all of our most important players and it took considerable time to recover. Now I can say they're on the right track and have been working very well for a few seasons now. They did something outstanding in winning the scudetto last May and they're back in the Champions League, too. Europe is in Milan's DNA.

How different is life as a manager, compared with that as a player?
Mimin Kipgen, via Twitter
Being a player is so much easier than being a manager. When you take to

HIGHS & LOWS

HIGH: 1997
Nets 24 Serie A goals for Atalanta to claim the Capocannoniere

LOW: 1998
Suffers 1-0 Champions League final defeat to Real Madrid

HIGH: 2003
Scores 12 Champions League goals en route to glory in the final against his former club, Juventus

LOW: 2005
Watches Miracle of Istanbul from stands due to bad knee injury

HIGH: 2007
Claims Champions League final revenge on Liverpool with brace

the pitch, you just depend on yourself. Knowing that, I was always serene, as I knew that I would do something good at some point during the game. Being a manager is more complicated: you aren't alone and so many factors play a role. You have 30 players to deal with, as well as your backroom staff, your directors, a president and fans' expectations. It's a completely different job. The secret is to always be yourself; to learn from all of the managers you had, and add your little touches to it. A manager will always improve and develop with time – you need to have faith in yourself and in everything you do, and to do it with passion.

Football gave me a lot as a player – more than I ever imagined – and now I love being a manager as it allows me to pass on what I've learned. I want my players to know that commitment is pivotal to success. There will be hard times. Some bosses have won the title and been sacked the following season – it's happened to me too. I didn't think I was the best manager before being sacked, nor did I think I was incapable of doing this job afterwards. I love what I do and really care about it, but I also maintain a healthy degree of calmness while doing it.

Is there a Premier League club you'd love to coach one day?
Mo_azhar.u_din, via Instagram
Having come close to joining Watford as a player, I'd love to manage a club in England one day. English football fascinates me. It would be challenging, but my children would benefit from the cultural and language experience. Funnily enough, I never faced Chelsea, Arsenal or Manchester City as a player – I had a few injuries during my time at Milan which stopped me from doing so. It would be amazing to manage the Italy national team in the future, too, but I'm still a young coach and I love being on the pitch every day.

"ITALIAN FOOTBALL HAS TO BE MORE OPEN AND BRAVE – LET ITS YOUNG PLAYERS PLAY"

Your management style has been compared to that of Carlo Ancelotti, your old boss. How important was he for you as a player and manager?
sunsetsinmyhair, via Instagram
Ancelotti was the most important manager and person I've ever met in football. I had him for over 10 years, first at Juventus, then at Milan. He's a special guy. You can't copy his style – he has a unique tranquillity and he makes everyone love him, even those who don't feature much in his teams. He's an awesome person and a source of inspiration for us all.

I talk to him from time to time and ask for advice. We have a fantastic relationship. I phoned him recently to tell him that, even as Liverpool went 2-0 up early against Real Madrid in the Champions League last 16 first leg, I knew that everyone at home should stay calm because he'd turn the game around. Madrid eventually came back and won 5-2. That's how good Carlo is.

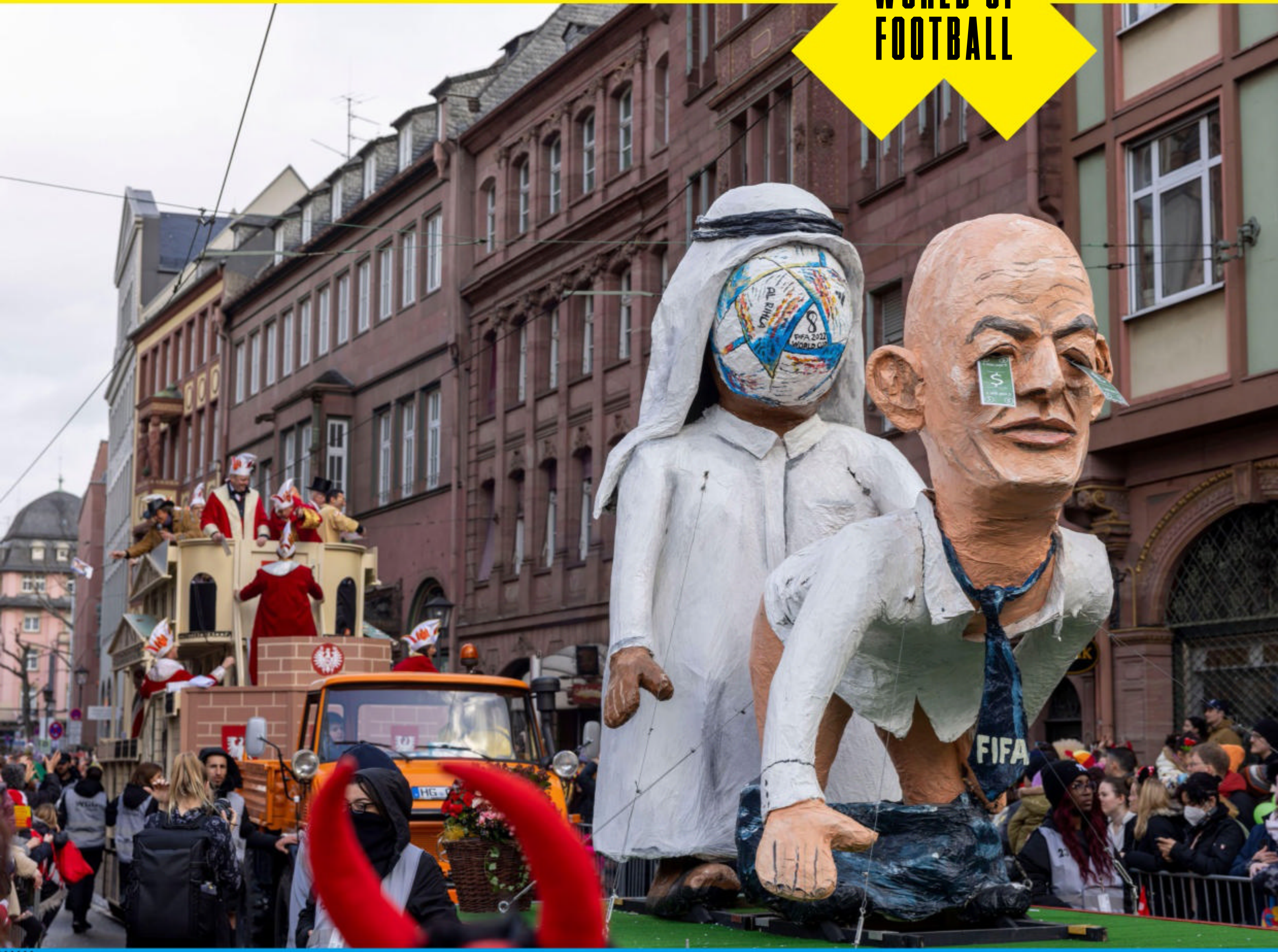
How do you treat your players? How do you make sure they feel at their best and perform to their maximum?
tmahlev, via Instagram
A manager has to understand what their group of players is like and who they are speaking to. You can't be the same manager all of the time, nor talk to everybody in the same way. Some players are shy, others more outgoing, but a good coach understands them all and treats them accordingly. What I really want is to avoid the mistakes that some managers made with me. Honesty is the most important quality: I prefer to say things just as they are, instead of embellishing them and coming across as fake. When a player believes that their manager is lying to him, the trust is gone for good. I like to keep good relationships with everyone, and I feel part of my group of players. Nevertheless, they have to understand there are rules they've got to respect. I give them credit when they deserve it and tell them straight if they don't do things the right way.

Who will win the Serie A title first as a manager: you, or your brother Simone, the current Inter coach?
Angelo Dinghile, Milan
Definitely Simone, because he's such a good coach and he deserves it. We talk to each other straight after each of our matches, to share reassurances and comments. He always watches my club's games, as I do his, unless we're travelling by plane and have no access to television. Simone is one of the best managers in Europe and has done incredibly well so far. In Italy, if you're too polite – and he is – then you usually attract more critics than you deserve. He never gets very loud – he's too well-mannered. Italians love those managers who scream and pretend to be better than they are. My brother is not like that.

Italy have failed to qualify for the past two World Cups. Is there a lack of Italian talent right now? Has the rest of the world figured out how to play against their style of football? Will the Azzurri struggle to qualify for the 2026 tournament?
Rich Esteves, via Facebook
No, I don't think so – Italy remain the same team that won Euro 2020. The last European qualifiers [for the 2022 World Cup] were born under an unlucky star and ended up even worse – if you replayed that North Macedonia game 100 times, you win it 99 times. It's hard to see Italy not qualifying for a World Cup; that shouldn't happen again. The Azzurri have some promising young players coming through, like Gianluca Scamacca, who's with West Ham, and Giacomo Raspadori. Scamacca will go on to become a better, stronger asset by playing in England, and Raspadori is doing well for Napoli. Having said that, Ciro Immobile is still Italy's best striker. I'd love to see him playing alongside one of those two.

Two decades ago, Italy had you, your brother Simone, Totti, Vieri, Del Piero, Roberto Baggio, Enrico Chiesa and Luca Toni to pick from. Why does the Azzurri produce few top strikers now?
Gary Whittingham, via email
It's cyclical. Italian football has to let its players play, and be more open and brave towards youngsters. Italy have some very interesting younger players, such as Federico Chiesa – who's been out for a long period due to injury – in addition to Raspadori and Scamacca. Giovanni Di Lorenzo, Nicolo Barella and Marco Verratti are top players, though we might start to struggle in defence with Giorgio Chiellini's and Leonardo Bonucci's careers drawing to a close.

In my day, Italian football was the best in Europe, and not only in terms of strikers. Our generation took Milan to three Champions League finals in 2003, 2005 and 2007. We missed out in 2004 due to an once-in-a-lifetime comeback by Deportivo La Coruna in the quarter-finals, having won the first leg 4-1, and in 2006 we were unlucky to lose to a decisive semi-final goal from Ludovic Giuly against Barcelona. That year I scored braces against Lyon and Bayern Munich, but I couldn't face Barça due to tonsillitis. The last Italian club to win a Champions League final was Inter against Bayern back in 2010. It's so far in the past! ●



MEANWHILE IN...

...Frankfurt, carnival-visiting families got more than they bargained for – Gianni Infantino with his pants down

1

"AVERT YOUR EYES, DARLING!"

Gianni Infantino gets everywhere these days – sometimes without even knowing it.

In London for a March conference, the FIFA head honcho decided to watch Millwall against Norwich at The Den rather than go to Arsenal or Chelsea on the same day. Maybe he just couldn't get a ticket?

He's been in Germany, too. Well, sort of. Frankfurt's annual carnival features a parade where 300,000 turned out to see giant figurines on floats, including Vladimir Putin eating a map of Ukraine, Eintracht Frankfurt boss Oliver Glasner holding the 2022 Europa League trophy, and a 'creative' depiction of Infantino.

As horrified parents watched on, bent-over Gianni sidled past with his pants down and dollar notes in his eyes, while a man in Arab dress stood behind him sporting a World Cup football for a face. What could the creators have possibly been trying to say about the 2022 tournament? If only they'd been less subtle.

Legal disclaimer: Mr Infantino was not the FIFA president when the tournament was awarded, and there's no suggestion he acted improperly. Or had any dealings with a man wearing a football for a face.

2

RELEASE CLAUSE

Spectators haven't exactly been flooding in to watch Romanian relegation strugglers Mioveni during the current campaign, so they had a novel idea to boost attendances.

Sitting bottom of the country's top division, the Yellow and Greens have been averaging gates of less than 2,000, so invited 25 prisoners for their fixture at home to Sepsi. The inmates helped to clear snow from the stands before the match, and were closely guarded at all times, presumably to stop them legging it when they went for a hot dog.

It wasn't just the inmates who got out of jail that afternoon, though – Mioveni bagged a 95th-minute goal to somehow avoid yet another loss.

3

BATTLE OF YPRES

Belgian side Westhoek called Stijn Meert 'the right man in the right place' after unveiling him as their new boss – that quickly looked a bit daft.

The former Zulte Waregem winger had been convicted last year of driving under the influence of cocaine, which was awkward, given that Westhoek's home ground in Ypres is entitled the Crackstadion, and their sponsors are the Crack furniture company.

Probably fearing the incoming jokes, Crack reportedly weren't happy about Meert's arrival – mysteriously absent for his first planned meeting with the squad, it was soon announced that he wouldn't be taking charge after all.

Right man, close to the wrongest place you could possibly imagine…

4

"WHAT'S MASSIMO CELLINO DONE NOW?"

When Brescia plunged towards the bottom of Serie B recently, Massimo Cellino had a cunning plan.

As always with the ex-Leeds owner, it wasn't a completely sensible plan. First, he announced he was quitting as chairman, but never actually left. Then he sacked boss Pep Clotet, rehired him a month later, but sacked him again after three matches. Then he hired new boss Davide Possanzini, but fired him as well, after only two weeks.

The next idea? An exorcist, of course: notoriously superstitious, Cellino called on a priest to lift a supposed curse on the training ground. That didn't work, either, and their bad run continued.

Never change, Massimo…

5

HOLY SOUTH AMERICAN SUPER CUP, BATMAN!

Flamengo duelled for another trophy when they faced Independiente del Valle in the Recopa Sudamericana – and were backed by an unlikely figure.

Having winged his way from Gotham City, Batman was spotted in the crowd at the Maracana donning a costume with Flamengo's logo on it. He wasn't the only famous face who was present – another man dressed as Santa Claus. Er, Christmas was months ago, mate?

Sadly, the Copa Libertadores winners lost to their Ecuadorian foes (the Copa Sudamericana champs) in the South American version of the UEFA Super Cup, as Batman and Santa's presence proved useless in their quest for glory.

Shearer and Sutton, they were not.

6

THE NOT QUITE SO FABULOUS BAKER BOY

When Jordan faced Tajikistan in their opening game of the U20 Asian Cup, Baker Kamal Kalbouneh was eager to get his tournament off to a flying start – but he possibly took the idea a little too literally.

After getting the match underway, the Jordanian chased after a floated ball forward before piling in and booting an opponent in the head, earning a red card after five seconds.

Despite playing with 10 men for 89 minutes and 55 seconds, Jordan still prevailed 2-0, almost as if they were a better side without having a nutter up front going round karate-kicking everyone. As soon as the forward returned from his ban, they were eliminated from the cup by Japan.

7

A PIG OF A SEASON

Everything has been going horribly wrong for Sampdoria during the current campaign, and their fans are taking it as well as you'd expect.

After finishing 15th in the top flight last term, the 1992 European Cup finalists won just 12 points from their first 26 games this season. That left them fully 12 points adrift of safety, sparking anger at club owner Massimo Ferrero, who quit as president in 2021 after his arrest on financial charges.

A bullet was recently delivered to the club offices, then a severed pig's head was addressed to Ferrero and vice president Antonio Romei, followed by the message that "the next heads will be yours". Which is nice.

Still, at least they didn't have to go out and buy anything for their lunch.

8

WILL THE REAL CSKA PLEASE STAND UP

CSKA Sofia could be about to bring an end to Ludogorets Razgrad's 11-year dominance of the Bulgarian top flight – despite a bizarre few years.

Razgrad have won every title since 2012 but trail CSKA, who dropped into the third tier in 2015 after cash woes. Confusingly, CSKA 1948 – a rival splinter club formed amid those money issues – are also flying high, currently third in the top flight, but it's the *other* CSKA who could win the league, with Hristo Stoichkov (above) as a key shareholder.

Alan Pardew was boss last year but quit, before ultras boycotted the first half of the current campaign in a row with the club management. For some reason, as glory approaches, they've decided they fancied returning now…

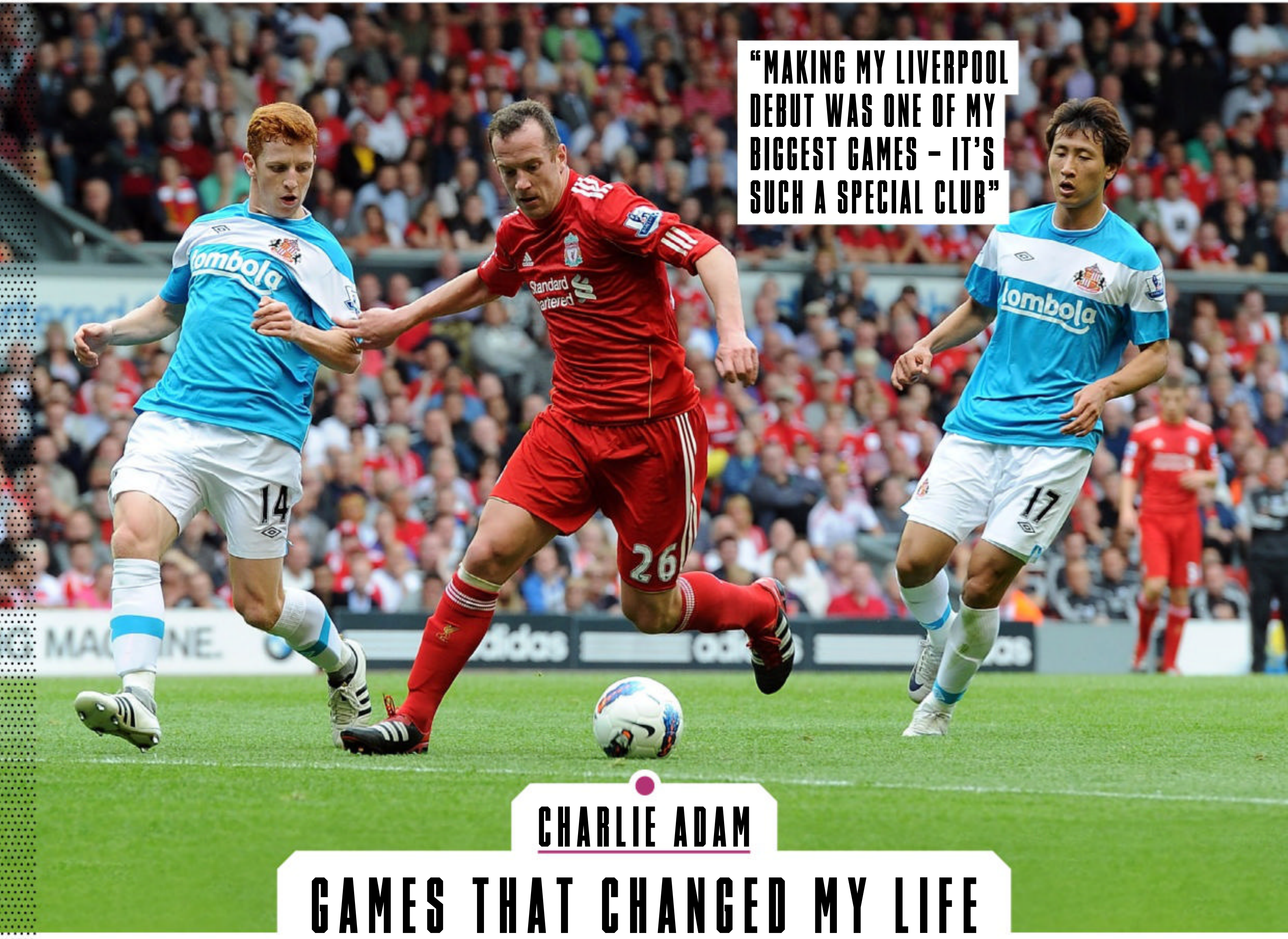
9

BEWARE THE DOG

When Doncaster launched a competition to guess the location of their mascot, they thought they were offering their fans an exciting prize – it ended up being more menacing.

The club posted a picture of Donny Dog, clearly on a train, asking people to tell them where he was. Er, on a train? After confirming that, surprise surprise, he was on a train (an LNER train, don't forget the sponsors), they revealed that the competition winner would receive 'a hospital experience at tomorrow's clash with Bradford'.

"Congratulations to one Doncaster fan, who is apparently going to be beaten up by mascot Donny Dog," journo Emma Smith tweeted, before the club hastily amended the post to 'hospitality experience'. Oops.



“MAKING MY LIVERPOOL DEBUT WAS ONE OF MY BIGGEST GAMES – IT’S SUCH A SPECIAL CLUB”

CHARLIE ADAM

GAMES THAT CHANGED MY LIFE

Austria 0-1 Scotland

May 30, 2007

International friendly

“Playing for your country is a massive achievement – all the hard work and performances you put in at club level get you that recognition. My Scotland career is something I’m really proud of. My debut came against Austria, with 30,000 fans in attendance in Vienna – Garry O’Connor hit the only goal and I then came on for Shaun Maloney. I only played for about 20 minutes, but it was a special occasion and brilliant feeling. You work since you’re a kid to earn that opportunity. I was proud to receive one cap, so to finish on 26 was amazing, but I wanted more and felt I should have played more times for my country. Managers change, though. One minute you’re in the picture and the next you’re out of it. That’s what can happen in international football.”

Blackpool 3-2 Cardiff

May 22, 2010

Championship Play-off Final

“To play ‘the £90 million game’ in front of 82,000 people is what dreams are made of. After the semi-final, we were soon brought down to Earth when we went 1-0 down in the ninth minute. It was a hot day, but even though Cardiff were big favourites we felt we were the better side. Four minutes after they’d taken the lead, I scored a free-kick in what was a rollercoaster first period. Cardiff retook the lead, we equalised, then made it 3-2 when Brett Ormerod scored just before half-time. We had a modest budget and plenty believed we’d get relegated that season, but we had an unbelievable year and sneaked into the play-offs. When the full-time whistle blew, we were overcome with emotion – the club was back in the top flight for the first time since 1970-71.”

Liverpool 1-1 Sunderland

August 13, 2011

Premier League

“Making my Liverpool debut in front of the Kop against Sunderland would have to be one of my biggest games. That was special, after joining the club from Blackpool, and getting an assist was memorable too. We were given a free-kick on the right-hand side after 12 minutes, I whipped it in and Luis Suarez glanced a header into the net. Luis had already missed a penalty in the opening few minutes of the game, and unfortunately Sebastian Larsson equalised with a volley in the second half. We deserved the points, but the passion and pride I experienced from the supporters that day at Anfield was incredible. Liverpool is a fantastic club, known worldwide. The team has great fans through the good times and the bad, and I got a taste of that early on.”

Kilmarnock 1-2 Dundee

May 24, 2021

Scottish Premiership Play-off Final

“I made the huge decision to chase a personal dream of trying to take my boyhood club, Dundee, back to where they belong. We defeated Kilmarnock in the play-off final to earn promotion to the Scottish Premiership, and it was just a perfect way for me to top off my 20-year career. We were 2-1 up from the first leg, then got two early goals in the return fixture at Rugby Park. It was so emotional because I’d lost my mum, who was diagnosed with bowel and liver cancer, in the same season. She would have been happy to see me voted the Championship Player of the Year. Playing for and captaining the Dark Blues was special. As we partied on the pitch with a bottle of bubbly, I know my late dad would also have been up there shedding tears of joy.”

Interview Grant Shub

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THE ULTIMATE QUIZ

Try out these testers, featuring an old-school boss and a popular dinosaur. No, neither answer is Neil Warnock...

01 Which Arsenal superstar offered to cover the wages of redundant mascot Gunnersaurus amid the 2020 COVID lockdown?

02 Which three clubs did Clarence Seedorf collect a European Cup winner's medal with?

03 Which Premier League team is the only one to have the word 'London' included on its badge?

04 An Olympic goal is scored from a) inside your own half, b) inside the six-yard box or c) a corner?

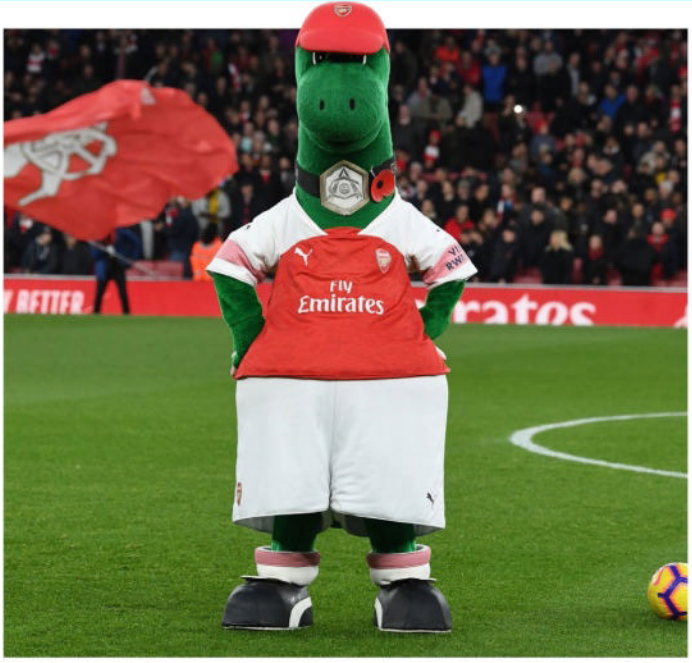
05 The Ekstraklasa is the name of the top flight in which Eastern European nation?

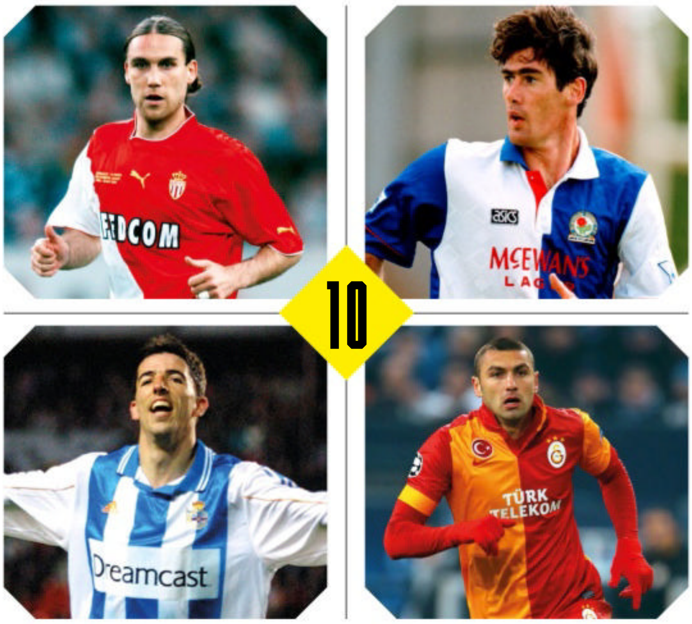
06 Mohamed Salah won his second PFA Players' Player of the Year prize in 2022 – who was the last British recipient of the award?

07 Brazil's 2002 World Cup-winning triumvirate Ronaldo, Rivaldo and Ronaldinho were all on the books of Barcelona and which other side?

08 Kylian Mbappe scored a famous hat-trick in the 2022 World Cup Final – who netted the only other treble at the tournament?

09 Fictional manager Mike Bassett left which very real football club to take the England job, after lifting the Mr Clutch Cup at Wembley?





10

These four marksmen have all hit hat-tricks in a Champions League game – who are they?

11 Which stopper did Steven Gerrard follow as Liverpool skipper, under Gerard Houllier in 2003?

12 Which two countries will host the 2023 Women's World Cup in July and August this year?

13 Can you tell us the cities picked to stage the finals of these eight competitions below?

1990 World Cup	
1993 Champions League	
2001 FA Cup	
2004 European Championship	
2006 Champions League	
2010 World Cup	
2019 Europa League	
2019 Women's World Cup	

14 Who were the last team to beat Real Madrid in a major European final, a whopping 40 years ago?

15 Which ex-Crystal Palace, Wigan, QPR and Watford defender was ingeniously known as 'One Size'?

16 Erling Haaland made 89 outings for Borussia Dortmund – did he notch 86, 89 or 92 goals?

17 Only one Englishman has bagged the best young player gong at the World Cup – who is he?

18 Which European giant's esteemed academy has a name that means 'The Farmhouse' in English?

---

1. Mesut Ozil **2.** Ajax, Real Madrid, Milan **3.** West Ham **4.** A corner **5.** Poland **6.** Gareth Bale **7.** Milan **8.** Goncalo Ramos (Portugal) **9.** Norwich **10.** Dado Prso, Mike Newell, Roy Makaay, Burak Yilmaz **11.** Sami Hypia **12.** Australia and New Zealand **13.** Rome, Munich, Cardiff, Lisbon, Paris, Johannesburg, Baku, Lyon **14.** Aberdeen **15.** Fitz Hall **16.** 86 **17.** Michael Owen **18.** Barcelona (La Masia)

NOT SORRY In Serie B, Ternana's president was defiant after spitting at fans: "They spat first – if there'd been no moat between us, they'd have got two pizzas in the face"

THE CELLINO ZONE MORTADA MANSOUR

The jailed Zamalek chief has vented his ire at Al Ahly, Mark Clattenburg and robots

Manchester City and Zamalek have both been reigned by a man called Mansour – one has stayed quietly in the background, the other... less so.

Mortada Mansour became president of the Egyptian giants in 2005 – after stints as a lawyer and an MP – but was ousted within eight months as internal feuds sent Zamalek into chaos, so the government stepped in to dissolve the board. Mansour immediately won the presidency again in 2006... then was removed again, jailed for insulting the head of Egypt's State Council, as well as storming his office.

By 2014, briefly flirting with running for presidency of the entire country, he returned for a third Zamalek spell as they won their first league title in 11 years – a drought that started with his chaotic first reign. Things went wrong again, though: Alex McLeish was hired then sacked within 10 matches, and rivals Al Ahly resumed their dominance, Mansour bizarrely accusing them of winning via black magic.

Also blaming the COVID pandemic on droids ("God punishes humanity because we made a robot to compete with the creator"), he was suspended by CAF for insulting president Ahmad Ahmad, then banned from Egyptian sport for four years – prompting yet another Zamalek exit, before his latest inevitable return in 2022.

Egypt's ref chief Mark Clattenburg recently quit after Mansour made false claims he was in a gay relationship, leading to threats from Zamalek fans.

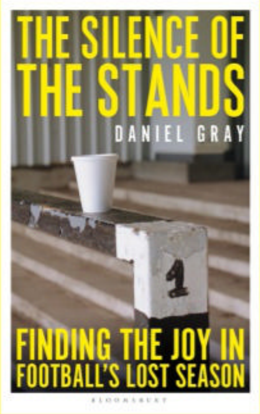
Not that the trained lawyer reined it in at that point. He spent February in the slammer, after defaming Al Ahly's president. "Lions fear neither death nor prison," Mansour soon said. They're a bit wary of robots, though.

WHO ARE YA? | IF TRAUMA

COULD BE The most distressing side that ever existed, featuring kidnap, waterboarding and Felix Magath force-feeding players cheese, while reciting Rudyard Kipling's famous poem. No, Felix, no!

ACTUALLY A perfectly harmless Norwegian fourth-tier team, from Tromoya in the south of the country – last season they finished second in the table, so they actually quite enjoyed themselves, with no sign of Felix Magath whatsoever. Phew...

REQUIRED READING


THE SILENCE OF THE STANDS
DANIEL GRAY
FINDING THE JOY IN FOOTBALL'S LOST SEASON
BLOOMSBURY

THE SILENCE OF THE STANDS

Daniel Gray
(Bloomsbury Sport, £12.99)
●●●●●

For the majority of supporters, watching football in lockdown meant listening to the shrieks of players and backroom staff rattling around deserted stadia via the medium of television.

The intrepid Daniel Gray on the other hand – warned by his mother 'not to hug anyone if they score' – ventured to a raft of outposts to gauge how clubs and their communities coped during the strangest of times.

His gumshoe research means the book, which takes in Kendal, Lancaster, Cowdenbeath and Raith, is part-travelogue, part social history. At Workington's Borough Park, the spirit of Bill Shankly, who managed the club in the 1950s, is skilfully brought to life by Gray's gift for casting a fresh perspective on stories from the distant past.

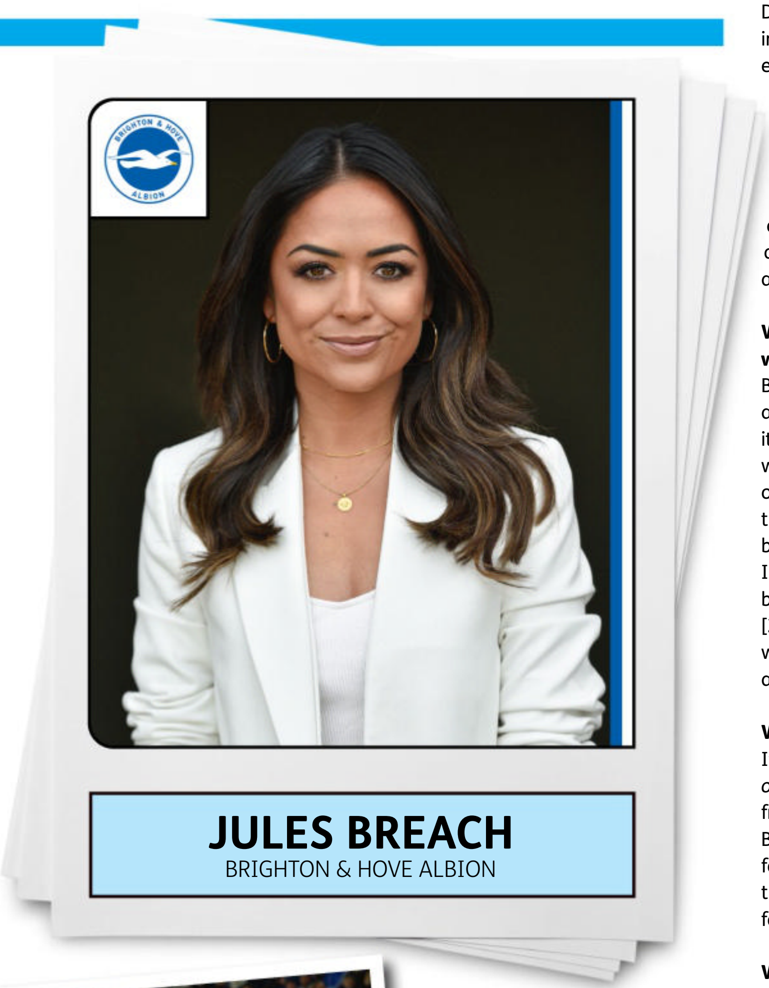
He also pops along to York's Bootham Crescent, about to be bulldozed and redeveloped, where descriptions of empty catering kiosks and ghostly stands are evocative. Offbeat and quirky, *The Silence of the Stands* is an excellent read. Here's hoping – for all the right reasons – it remains a one-off.

Jon Spurling

13 **ROUT** Den Bosch lost 13-0 at PEC Zwolle in the Dutch second tier, equalling the national record for a league match, set when Erik ten Hag's Ajax smashed 13 at VVV-Venlo in 2020

MY FOOTBALL

The presenter on Zamora, Mitoma and Keegan's eggs, before her new *FFT* column



JULES BREACH
BRIGHTON & HOVE ALBION

How did you become a Brighton fan?
I was born in Brighton. I moved to Jamaica with my parents when I was eight – while we were there, we could only watch Premier League football, and Brighton were far from the top flight back then! But I came back to England aged 15 and lived with my cousins, who are mad Albion fans. When the Amex Stadium opened in 2011, I got a job giving out match programmes, and I would always hang around to watch the games.

Do you have a matchday routine?
If I'm going along as a fan, I'm one of those people who likes to get there ridiculously early – three hours before kick-off. It always annoys my mates!

Who was your childhood hero and did you ever meet them?
My favourite footballer as a kid was Steven Gerrard [below]. When I first started working at BT Sport, he was part of our punditry team; I met him and remember saying to myself, 'Oh wow, that's Steven Gerrard' – I was absolutely buzzing.

How has football changed since you were a kid?
Living in Jamaica, football was sitting on the sofa and watching it on TV with my dad, so I'm very fortunate now that I get to go to games pretty much every week. Working in football, it's hard to go to matches and not think about them professionally. On a working day, I look at who's starting; how many changes from the last game; who's left out? Even when I go as a fan, it's quite hard to switch off, but it's a complete contrast from when I was a kid. It's really special.

What do you like most about going to a match?
The tribalism of it all – the chants, the pettiness, the ridiculous things fans shout to each other from an away end when the home fans are nearby. Then obviously you can't beat the feeling when your team scores and you and your mates just absolutely lose it.

What's your favourite goal that you've ever seen live?
Brighton against Crystal Palace at the Amex: Florin Andone didn't get many for Albion, but he scored our third in a 3-1 win with an amazing solo run from his own half, which was unexpected. I was sitting on that side of the pitch where he ran down the line, so I had a brilliant view of it.

Who from your club's past would you immediately bring back to play for the current side?
Bobby Zamora – an absolute legend. His era was when I started to properly get into watching Brighton, and he was an unbelievable goalscorer; a Brighton hero to the point where my cousin's email and password for anything had to be 'Zamora 25'.

Who's your current favourite player?
Kaoru Mitoma [bottom right]. I'm obsessed! He's yet another brilliant find by Brighton's recruitment team – he cost less than £3m. He started off quite slowly and was only used as a sub, but since the World Cup he has been unbelievable. I think he could be one of the most exciting players that Brighton have ever had: he gets fans out of their seats.

Which player do you admire who never played for your club?
Declan Rice. I was covering West Ham in Europe last season, so I watched every single one of their Premier League and European games, and I don't think I've ever seen a player as consistent as him. He controls the midfield, picks out incredible passes, is always forward-thinking, and you rarely see him misplace a pass. He's also a great character and a leader.

Where's the best place you've ever watched a game?
Brighton were playing an FA Cup game against Millwall at The Den, and I saw it on a flight to Jamaica. The reception wasn't very good and it kept cutting out – it was a really dramatic match that went to extra time and penalties, but Brighton got through in the end. In terms of being in a ground, I loved being at Wembley Stadium for the [2022] Women's Euros final. I wasn't working – I was there as a supporter – and it was such a good day.

What's your favourite football book?
I'll go for *Football Murals: A Celebration of Soccer's Greatest Street Art* by my friend from the *Football Ramble*, Andy Brassell. I didn't realise just how many football murals there are all around the world. It's a celebration of what football can really do.

What's the best food you've ever had at a game?
Borussia Dortmund have what must be the world's biggest pick 'n' mix stand. It took me about 10 minutes to walk around it. I've got a massive sweet tooth, so I spent an absolute fortune on this huge bag of pick 'n' mix – I'd never seen that before at a stadium.

Where's the strangest place you've ever met a manager or player?
When I was little in Jamaica, we went on holiday to a different part of the island and bumped into Kevin Keegan at the breakfast buffet. My father is a huge football fan, so he went over to have a chat with him. It was very odd, seeing Kevin Keegan getting an omelette in Jamaica!

> "MY COUSIN'S PASSWORD FOR EVERYTHING WAS 'ZAMORA 25'. BOBBY IS SUCH A BRIGHTON HERO"

What's the strangest thing you've ever seen at a game?
Carlton Cole [above] vacuuming the carpets at the London Stadium. We were working together on the Europa League last season, and for one game we had pie and mash on set and got a few crumbs on the carpet, so Carlton whipped the hoover out and started cleaning the set before we went on air!

Which of Brighton's former players has the best job now?
Robbie Savage: he's director of football at Macclesfield, and also gets bossed about by me every Saturday in the BT Sport studio! Or Jurgen Locadia, who's a DJ and rapper.

What are you most looking forward to about writing a column for *FFT*?
I'm buzzing – I always wanted to write before I got into broadcasting, so I'm super excited to be writing a column every month. I want to tell interesting stories and hope to use my experience working across all of the country's divisions, as well as covering European tournaments, to share my opinion and insight across the competitions I'm at. It's going to be fun!
James Andrew

Read Jules' column in FFT from next month, and catch her on BT Sport, ITV and Channel 4 throughout the season

"PLAY ON, LADS!"

Gareth Southgate's reign will be depicted at the National Theatre in June

A lot of column inches have been written about Gareth Southgate managing England – positive, negative, or oddly erotic in that waistcoat-rippling summer of 2018. Now his tenure is inspiring actual proper culture, on a prestigious London stage, with a Hollywood heartthrob playing the affable gaffer.

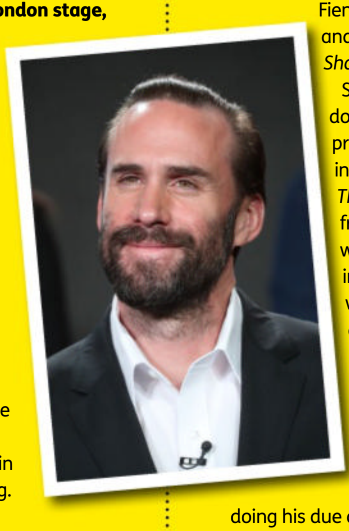
Dear England kicks off at the National Theatre in June, having been penned by James Graham.

"I've always been mildly obsessed by the England team," the acclaimed playwright tells *FFT*. Graham calls Southgate "a very humble guy" but sees drama in his story, from anguish at Euro 96 to inspirational leader. "I think it's Shakespearean," he says. "It's got that arc, of an individual doing something extraordinary against the backdrop of a nation." Bill would surely approve, while also throwing in a few puns and some cross-dressing.

This production is a big deal – The National is Wembley for serious playwrights – and it's named after the open letter Southgate wrote to the nation before Euro 2020, praising the players' activism and calling for unity and positive patriotism. "That confirmed for me that there's something very interesting going on around the culture Gareth was trying to disrupt and gently shift," explains Graham.

Dear England tackles England's evolution, from the Euro 2016 Iceland embarrassment, pre-Southgate, to Russia 2018's highs – "breaking that penalty curse against Colombia," recalls Graham, adding, "Even back then I thought, 'There's something in this – the unlikely figure of Gareth Southgate leading a play.'"

Who can do him justice? Step forward, Joseph Fiennes (left) of *The Handmaid's Tale* and period dramas *Elizabeth* and *Shakespeare in Love*. But of course.



Still, football and theatre haven't dovetailed well of late. Numerous productions have bemoaned interruptions: Nottingham's *Titanic: The Musical* was disrupted by the front row cheering that shootout win over Colombia, and West End impresario Cameron Mackintosh wrote to the Prime Minister after a theatre was damaged by overexuberance during the Euros. We'll see how rogue chants go down if terrace types turn up to watch *Dear England*.

We football fans are sticklers for authenticity, so Graham is doing his due diligence, interviewing players, journalists, academics, sports psychologists and more. England expects – as he learned recently. "My cab driver heard the word 'theatre' and said, 'Oh, have you heard about this Southgate play?' I thought, 'Oh my god, it's cut through!' It's the first time a taxi driver has been vaguely interested in a play of mine."

That's all well and good, but where's the play about Southgate's predecessor? *FFT* demands to see Ricky Tomlinson as Sam Allardyce, chugging a pint of wine.
Si Hawkins

INTERVIEW

MARCOS ROJO

After seven years at Old Trafford and a hefty fine from Louis van Gaal, the 33-year-old is back home in Argentina with Boca

In 2021, you left Manchester United to sign for Boca Juniors. How did the fans welcome you?
Fantastically well. The fans are crazy – the Bombonera is a permanent party. The passion of the Argentine people is incomparable, even more than the English. In the street, they let you know how much they love you. I'm injured now and every fan tells me that they miss me, which gives me strength. In Buenos Aires, it's much more complicated than in England to go out for a quiet dinner. In England, they respected you in that private space. Here, they ask you for photos or a greeting at every step. It's nice.

You mention injury – the one to your cruciate ligament in October, yes?
The moment it happened, I was very sad. I realised it immediately as I fell. The first few days were hard but, with the support of family and friends, the desire to compete again came back. In principle the doctor has said that I should be playing in May or June.

What was it like to play in the Superclasico against River Plate?
I lived through two of them during the pandemic, without a crowd. When they came back, it was incredible. The Bombonera was shaking. When people talk about fans being the 12th man, that is truer than ever in the case of Boca during a Superclasico. I invited Ander Herrera to one – I think he will come soon. I have a good relationship with him, as well as David de Gea, Antonio Valencia, Sergio Romero and Juan Mata. We send messages to each other from time to time.

In your first spell in Argentina, you represented Estudiantes in the 2009 Club World Cup Final against Pep Guardiola's Barcelona, and were winning until the 89th minute...
We came so close to winning. At first, it was painful and sad, but with the passage of time, I remember it fondly. We competed against one of the best teams in history. I was only 19, and in the tunnel I met Zlatan Ibrahimovic, Thierry Henry and Lionel Messi. In Argentina, we only watched them on the PlayStation. I watched Messi like a fan during that match – I was on the pitch and couldn't believe it. I looked at him and thought I was hallucinating – I was playing against Leo!

You moved to Europe with Spartak Moscow. What was that like?
Until I left Argentina, I was living with my parents. Russia wasn't easy: it was a drastic change in my life. I tried to enjoy myself and learn, even though the time difference with Argentina was big, which made staying in touch with people complicated. I spent a lot of time alone.

What about your move to Sporting?
After Russia, going to Portugal was like going back to Argentina. My wife and I felt comfortable from the first day and there were four Argentines in the dressing room. I immediately felt loved.

How do you reflect now on the 2014 World Cup, and losing the final?
It was unforgettable – unique. I'll never experience anything like it again. It was in Brazil, very close to home, and the streets of Rio de Janeiro felt like the streets of Buenos Aires. For many years, it was sad to remember losing to Germany; now, I look back on the road I've travelled. I played in a World Cup final – not many can say that.

How did your move to Manchester United come about that summer?
They came to me through Louis van Gaal – we faced his Netherlands side in the World Cup semi-final and I had a great game. An intermediary from United called my agent and said they were interested. That week lasted forever, because I was waiting for United and Sporting to come to an agreement, but luckily it was done.

X-RATED French club Nice have filed a complaint to the police, after a pornstar filmed an adult video inside the stadium toilets during a recent home game against Lille

"MANCHESTER UNITED ARE A SLEEPING GIANT AND GUARDIOLA HAS MADE LIFE DIFFICULT"

Is Van Gaal as scary as he seems?
It's scary if you don't know him. He seems serious, but when you're with him, he's a caring guy – strict, but fair if you're respectful and do what he demands. I'm very grateful to him.

He did fine you, though, because you hadn't renewed your passport...
The national team needed my papers so I could go to the 2015 Copa America in Chile. We reached the final, I came home, and United said I had to report to the United States for pre-season. It took too long with my passport and my visa, and I couldn't go. It was a terrible fine: £300,000. Van Gaal was so angry! I laugh now, but it hurt then.

What changed under Jose Mourinho?
Jose Mourinho is a different manager to Van Gaal. He's a born winner, only interested in competing and winning – it doesn't matter how. He likes South American players because he had a few at Inter and remembered them with great affection. I had good times with him until he was sacked.

Was it tense in that dressing room?
It wasn't easy in a club where there were so many big stars and egos, and with such a big name as coach. In that dressing room there was Zlatan, Paul Pogba, Michael Carrick, Wayne Rooney, and everyone often wanted to impose themselves. The rest of us tried to go along with them, always with respect. Luckily I didn't have any problems with anyone. United have been a sleeping giant for many years now. They won everything with Sir Alex Ferguson, and after his retirement there were too many changes of direction. First David Moyes, then Van Gaal, Mourinho... the results didn't help, and it didn't help to have a city rival like Manchester City. Pep Guardiola revolutionised English football and made life difficult for us.

Did injuries plague you at that time?
In 2017 I hurt my knee, then I started to have a lot of different injuries. The 2018 World Cup was always on my mind: I came back as soon as possible so that I could be in Russia, but with hindsight I think I paid that bill. I didn't make a good recovery.

What did Ole Gunnar Solskjaer say to you before you left the club?
He wanted me to stay at United. I had an important role in the dressing room – I got on well with the young players. Solskjaer liked me, but I needed more game time. I wanted to be more of a protagonist. I decided to come back to Argentina, also for family reasons. It was hard for Ole to understand, but he put himself in my shoes. I remember my time in England with enormous affection. My last two daughters were born there. I miss Manchester and I look at Old Trafford as one of the best things to happen to me in my career.
Dani Gil

ANOTHER FINE MESS

An out-of-date passport? Pah. This trio were hit in the pocket for even stranger reasons

KENNY BURNS

The Scot won two European Cups under Brian Clough at Nottingham Forest, but once infuriated his boss by attempting a square pass across his own penalty area during a game. Clough immediately sent someone to his office to write out a £50 fine, then handed it to Burns at half-time.

JOHN HEWITT

Alex Ferguson was easily irked, too, as Hewitt found out at Aberdeen, merely by overtaking his manager on a public road in perfectly legal fashion. Fergie – who would later use the hard shoulder illegally when he had the runs – gave the Cup Winners' Cup final legend the hairdryer, followed by a £20 fine.

ROBBIE SAVAGE

Few footballers have been fined for using a toilet, but Savage managed it with Leicester. He was forced by the FA to pay £10,000 after using referee Graham Poll's loo without permission, having been taken ill before a Filbert Street fixture. When you've got to go, you've got to go...

@FOURFOURTWO ASKS...

WHAT'S THE LEAST IMPORTANT THING IN FOOTBALL THAT STILL ANNOYS YOU?

The way players put the ball right on the edge of the corner arc.
Elis James

Players covering mouths with their hands when they talk to each other.
Olaf Falafel

Removing the away goals rule.
@drMNSakib

Using a towel to dry the ball.
@Retrofootytop

The pre-match handshakes. Bring back the running out of the tunnel and the little jump.
Graham Fradd

Goalkeepers collecting a cross and unnecessarily falling forward to the ground to waste time. Only happens if they're getting the result they want, never if losing. Automatic yellow card for time-wasting.
Jonathan Mitchell

Arsenal being called the Invincibles when they lost six games that season and only won one trophy.
@WildBilly6

350 SPINE LINE: "'England U15 vs Turkey U15' was the game in which Jamal Musiala and Jude Bellingham both debuted for England," says Alex Pascalides, via email. That's the one! Cracked the Spine Line? For a chance to win an Art Of Football T-shirt or A4 print, enter on Twitter via #FFTSpineLine or email fourfourtwo@futurenet.com

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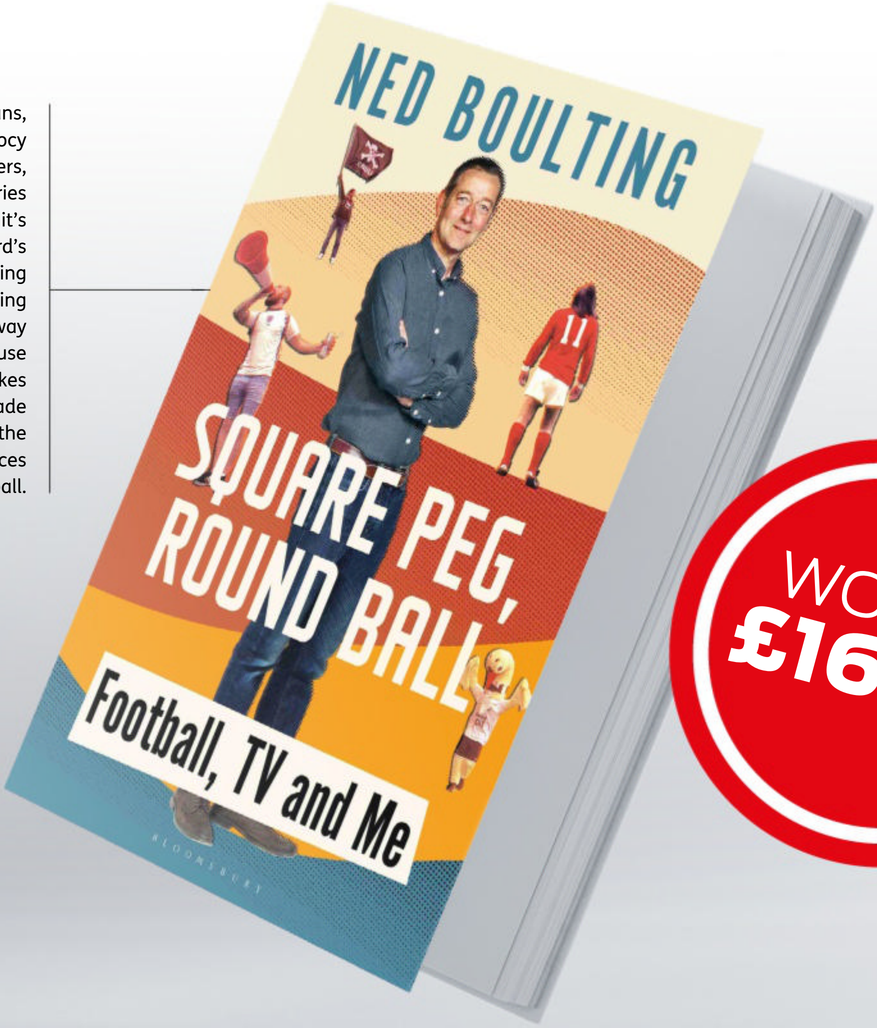

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WHO NEEDS CRISTIANO RONALDO?

Since CR7's Manchester United exit in November, a revitalised Marcus Rashford's form has gone stratospheric. The journey to this point hasn't been easy, though, via penalty shootout heartbreak and a brush with Boris

Words Andy Mitten

The phone call to Manchester United came from Boris Johnson's personal secretary, with the world paralysed by pandemic back in November 2020.

"Boris wants to talk to Marcus now."

"He's training."

"Well, you'll need to get him from training, because Boris wants to talk to him now."

"Sorry, but he can't, he's training."

The UK's Prime Minister and one of the UK's top forwards did eventually talk, after the Red Devils had played Everton behind closed doors. The Goodison Park scoreboard that day showed an image of Rashford along with the words: "Thank you for sticking up for our kids who needed a voice, here on Merseyside and across the country." There's very little that unites Manchester and Liverpool, but Rashford managed it.

Sadly, no one was fortunate enough to be a fly on the wall for the conversation between Rashford and Johnson, but it was reported that Rashford, awarded an MBE a month previously, was "overwhelmed with pride" at the progress of his campaign to fight child food poverty. In a government U-turn, ministers announced a £170 million winter grant scheme, aimed at helping low-income families struggling because of COVID.

A banner soon appeared underneath the 'Welcome to Wythenshawe' sign, close to where Rashford spent some of his childhood, declaring: "Rashford 1 Boris 0." The one-time bed sheet now hangs in the National Football Museum in Manchester, alongside artwork that was commissioned by the enduringly anti-establishment Eric Cantona.

Marcus Rashford scored 21 Manchester United goals during that COVID-interrupted 2020-21 season, as Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's side finished second in the Premier League. He'd netted 22 the season before, well up on the eight, 11, 13 and 13 goals of his first four seasons at Old Trafford. Rashford's star was ascendant on and off the pitch, a bright light in the pandemic's omnipotent gloom.

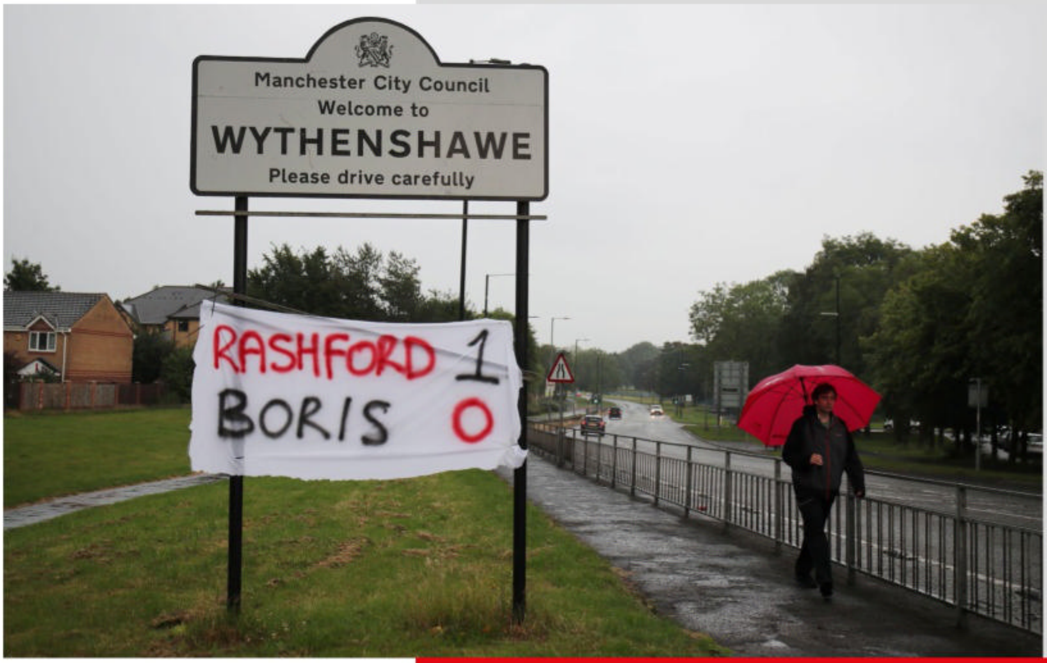
Pep Guardiola once told a United legend that Rashford – whose solo strike in the 1-0 March 2016 win at the Etihad Stadium made him the Manchester derby's youngest scorer and all-but retired Martin Demichelis – was the only player from across the city he'd take to his own team. Years earlier, City sent senior officials to Rashford's house when he was still a youth player to try to sign him, but were met with a no thanks: he was a Manchester United fan. Barcelona tried in the spring of 2019, but knew they were pushing their luck. They still went back last summer, to ask again for the player that Jose Mourinho once described as being "at the head of the talent" at the club he then managed.

Football's biggest names rated Rashford. Assessing the possibility of the speedster making it at Old Trafford, Sir Alex Ferguson had long told his former players that "the kid Rashford has got a real chance". And he did. Though never considered prolific, his scoring statistics were better than those of Cristiano Ronaldo's at the same age. Rashford scored a winner at Paris Saint-Germain away. Twice. There was a first treble against RB Leipzig in the Champions League, goals against Arsenal and Liverpool, plus a screamer at Chelsea. To this day, Rashford's highlight remains his debut, when he was rushed in to play for an injury-hit side against Midtjylland in a Europa League match in 2016, scoring twice aged 18.

As the social causes elevated his profile and former US President Barack Obama praised him, Rashford became one of sport's most marketable entities – a young homegrown forward with a wholesome off-field image, backed up by his support for social justice for the less privileged. The man who'd marvelled at Odell Beckham Jr during a 2017 event at Nike's HQ was now surpassing the NFL star's popularity on social media.

Adidas and Nike both vied to work with Rashford, he released a best-selling children's book, and lucrative endorsements followed for A-list brands such as Burberry, but the social projects came from his heart. Rashford really had gone hungry as a kid.

Most people within United, and indeed in society, welcomed his off-field work. As time went on, though, there were worries. At Old Trafford, some wondered whether the club were becoming part of the Marcus Rashford story, when they felt that nobody was bigger



> “MARCUS WAS A GREAT KID AND IS ALL ABOUT FAMILY – HE WAS NEVER DISTRACTED LIKE OTHERS”

MEGAFON
Thank you for sticking up for our kids who needed a voice, here on Merseyside and across the country.
The Everton Fans' Forum
forum
Everton Remembers
evertonfc.com

Clockwise from above “Sorry Boris, I’m busy”; inviting Fergie to his honorary degree award; Merseyside love; “Anyone seen our bed sheet?”

than the club. United were already doing extensive work across the local community through their own foundation, which was being overshadowed.

While tweets from his personal account went viral and were for a good cause, some didn’t sound like Marcus Rashford at all.

“One of the more comprehensive and extensive marketing jobs that has been done around an athlete,” explains a high-level PR specialist to *FourFourTwo*. “But it was well done and it did a lot of good.

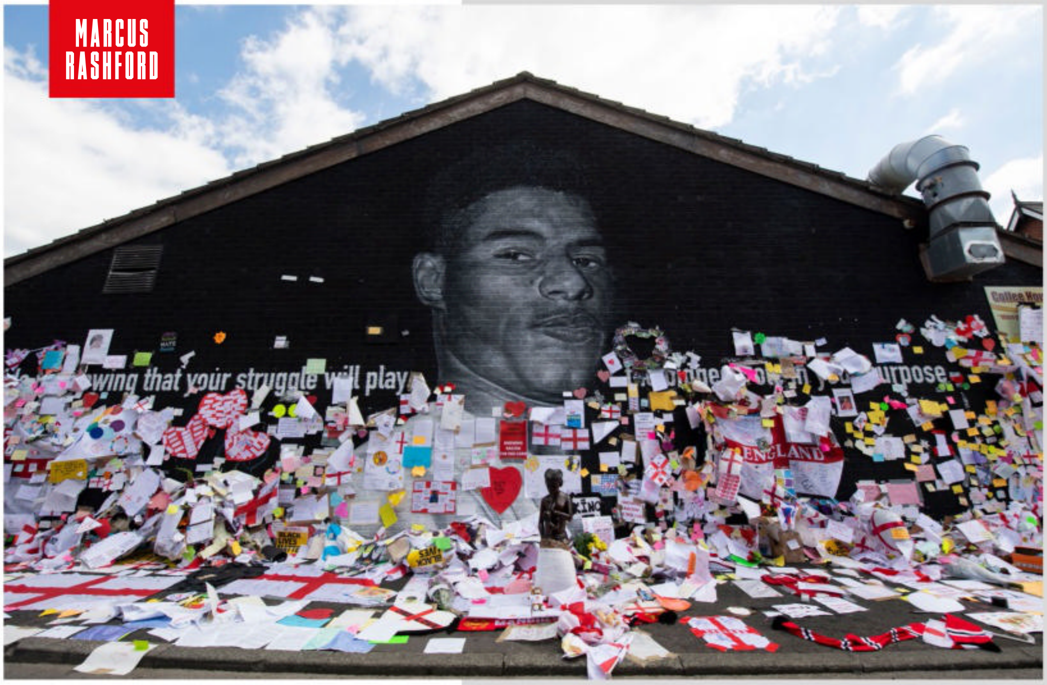
“Marcus became more comfortable with the messaging over time because he was intimately involved, but Kelly Hogarth [his then PR] was driving it and she did a very good job of it. Both for him and for what they achieved. He bought into it at the top level. He agreed to it, he pushed it.”

In October 2021, Rashford was awarded an honorary doctorate from The University of Manchester for “his ongoing charity work and campaign against child poverty off the field, as well as his outstanding sporting achievements on the pitch”. At 23, he was the youngest recipient of an honorary degree in the university’s history.

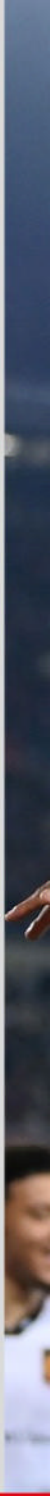
“Rashford invited five staff members, plus several players and Sir Alex Ferguson,” Paul McGuinness, who coached him as a young United talent, tells *FFT*. “That was lovely to be invited to a personal award alongside his team-mates and former coaches. Another coach, Tony Whelan, was very proud. We all were. Tony said, ‘You see someone you’ve coached when he was eight, who becomes your hero for his social work’.”

WHEN ALARM BELLS RANG(NICK)

Yet 2021 had not gone to plan for Rashford in a football sense. He didn’t feature as much as he’d hoped in Gareth Southgate’s plans during Euro 2020, starting none of England’s seven games in the run to the final, playing 83 minutes of a possible 690. One of those minutes was the last 60 seconds of the final, when he came on to take a penalty, then was the first England player to miss. The Three Lions had looked on course for success until that moment: Harrys Kane and Maguire both ▸



Above Rashford's mural covered in support post-Euro 2020 penalty miss **Right** On target at Barça in February, one of 16 goals in a 17-game streak



converted, while Andrea Belotti failed to beat Jordan Pickford for Italy. After Rashford hit an upright, Jadon Sancho and Bukayo Saka had their efforts saved by Gianluigi Donnarumma and the Azzurri were champions.

The online abuse for the three young black players was pernicious. The words "s**te in a bucket, bastard", "f**k Sancho", and "f**k Saka" were sprayed on to a Rashford mural in the Manchester suburb of Withington, where he and his siblings had spent the early part of his life. "Take pride in knowing that your struggle will play the biggest role in your purpose," was the mural's original wording.

Rashford was not in a good place when he headed back to Old Trafford. He was down, affected by what had happened. There were concerns from coaches about the time and energy the extracurricular stuff was taking, but they could also see value in the forward's off-field work and the praise it was attracting.

The 2021-22 campaign would be Rashford's worst. A niggling shoulder injury, combined with a disrupted pre-season, meant he sat out the first 10 games. He lost his place in the England team and wasn't selected for any of the 15 matches between the Euros final and the 2022 World Cup.

When he returned to Manchester United action, his team lost four league games in five, conceding four goals at Leicester and Watford as well as five at home to Liverpool. Solskjaer, with whom Rashford usually had a positive relationship, was sacked, replaced by caretaker Ralf Rangnick.

Alarm bells rang weeks into the German's interim reign. At Atletico Madrid in a crucial Champions League game, United's players didn't know their line-up 90 minutes before kick-off. Diego Simeone's charges had been working on shape for weeks. Rashford didn't even start in the home leg three weeks later, and few were surprised. He'd become a non-goalscoring forward, with only five goals to his name all season.

Coaches who'd worked with him became saddened. "Marcus was a great kid," former Manchester United striker Brian McClair, the head of the academy when Marcus came through, tells *FFT*. "I found his mum to be an incredible woman and Marcus to be all about family. Jesse Lingard was the one who would get more distracted. Marcus didn't. It wasn't just Marcus who was unhappy last year. A lot of players were unhappy."

McGuinness, the son of ex-Manchester United boss Wilf, had real sympathy with the forward. "He's played for the club at a time when there's been continuous change and turmoil," the coach points out. "That's not easy for a young player adapting to different managers, who all come with different ideas and change four or five players. The training changes – there were significant differences between David Moyes, Louis van Gaal and Jose Mourinho. It affects players.

"Football is really complex and all young players' development will have been stifled. Van Gaal had a logical step-by-step style of football with combinations and dribbling, the stuff Marcus had been brought up on. When you have a stable team, you start to build connections and passes with the players you've worked closely with. People think that if you bring a new player in, then it'll click. It doesn't usually happen. Casemiro clicked this season, but he's a five-time Champions League winner. Most of United's big buys didn't. If they had, Marcus would be even further on with his career than he is now."

This wasn't the first time that Rashford had encountered setbacks. "In the under-12s and under-13s, he was fantastic and often up against older boys," his then coach Neil Ryan explains to *FFT*. "You didn't feel that it was effortless like it was with Ravel Morrison. Marcus' attitude and talent always stood out, but aged 14 he had a confidence crisis and wanted to be a holding midfielder. I recall talking to his mother and brothers. He spoke about wanting to get on the ball more. He didn't have the pace then to burn past others because he was still growing, but we always thought he'd be a forward."

McGuinness knew the youngster well and was impressed by his seriousness. "Marcus was always respectful with me and driven to improve," he continues. "One of my jobs was to help players fall in love with the club. You

PAYING THE PENALTY

At Euro 2020, Rashford joined an unwanted list of players who have missed in a shootout for England. Some recovered better than others…

Coca-Cola
FUJIF

STUART PEARCE

Feeling like he had a point to prove after his Italia 90 miss, the Nottingham Forest full-back reached the FA Cup final a year later and smashed 16 goals that season, the best haul of his career. Exorcised his shootout ghosts with two cathartic penalties at Euro 96.

CHRIS WADDLE

The maestro shared Psycho's pain against West Germany, but also bounced back the following season as Marseille reached a first European Cup final. Cruelly, however, that ended in defeat to Red Star Belgrade – on penalties. This time, Waddle didn't take one.

GARETH SOUTHGATE

Hit badly by his Euro 96 miss against Germany, Southgate remained an England squad regular for eight years, even starring in a famous pizza ad with Pearce and Waddle. In his three major tournaments after 1996, he only started once, against Tunisia in 1998.

PAUL INCE

The midfielder's first England match after his 1998 World Cup penalty failure didn't go well – getting a second yellow card in a Euro 2000 qualifier in Sweden. Gaffer Glenn Hoddle was soon dismissed, and Ince had a spell out of the squad before returning for the finals.

DARIUS VASSELL

The Aston Villa man saw his spot-kick saved by a gloveless Ricardo against Portugal at Euro 2004, his last kick for England. An unused substitute in the Three Lions' next three games, his form dipped in an injury-plagued 2004-05, then he was never selected again.

want them to think of the place as their favourite youth club, to indoctrinate them. That was one idea behind taking them away on tours – that and specifically improving Marcus on his receiving skills on one trip to Germany. You are the guardians of Manchester United history, and I felt Marcus was massively in love with Manchester United. One reason for a drop in form last season was that he cared so much and thought, 'This isn't what it used to be', when he was a kid."

McGuinness had watched him flourish. "When Marcus was 18, we really worked on him learning to make runs behind defenders," says the former midfielder. "He hadn't been able to run for a time with Osgood-Schlatter disease [which causes pain below the knee joint, typically among active adolescents], so his development was delayed. He was easily good enough to play for the reserves, but there was a better way to coach him, as he had a lot to learn."

Learn he did. "He absolutely went for it," reflects McGuinness. "He'd text me and say, 'Did you see that run from Sergio Aguero or Wayne Rooney?' As a student, he was easy to coach, he wanted to learn. If you learn to spin as a forward, to lose your marker, come short or go behind, a whole new world opens up for you. That didn't happen for Marcus until he was 18.

"I'll never forget him having races straight after training. Marcus and Ro-Shaun Williams would go the full length of the pitch, like kids in a playground or wild horses running with the wind through their hair. They did it for fun, full of exuberance."

NO MORE BEANS, BEANS, BEANS

There was little exuberance on evidence by the end of 2021-22. Rashford reached 300 Manchester United first-team appearances aged just 24, but Rooney publicly urged him to "f**king get his head out of his arse" to turn his fortunes around.

After their final encounter of the campaign, a sixth consecutive away defeat at Crystal Palace on May 22, the team travelled back to Manchester Airport. The mood was glum, but the players knew they'd be going on holiday.

A private jet was waiting to take Rashford and his friends to Los Angeles, a week after ex-Red Devil Louis Saha encouraged him to take a lads' holiday to Las Vegas.

"He should go and enjoy himself as much as he can," said the Frenchman. "This guy is an amazing player – he just needs a rest and some time to think about his career and what he wants next. He has a massive future at United. Yes, he's struggling, but when you look at his potential and ability, it's nothing that he can't recover from. He needs to get back to where he was when he was 19, not over-thinking, or thinking about his status. Work hard, play with a smile and everything will be fine. This guy has it all."

Though Rashford was entitled to go away on holiday, some senior Manchester United ▸

"IT WASN'T EFFORTLESS – AT 14 HE HAD A CONFIDENCE CRISIS AND WANTED TO BE A HOLDING MIDFIELDER"

“HE’S RUTHLESS AND SCORING SO OFTEN IT’S BECOMING A HABIT – HE’S A MATCH-WINNER”

figures were not impressed when they saw his mates waiting sheepishly in the private terminal. The club had heard reports about hangers on, that he and other players had been spotted out and about in Manchester as the team’s form faltered. United were disappointed in Rashford and other players last season, but while some left at the end of the campaign with a feeling of ‘good riddance’, Rashford had a longer contract.

In Los Angeles, the man with an A-list profile but who couldn’t get into Rangnick’s starting XI kept his head down. There was no repeat of the 2019 close-season when he jumped around an American hotel room yelling ,“Beans! Beans! Beans!” with Jesse Lingard, even though his good friend was in California with him. Instead, he got engaged on the beach to his long-term partner Lucia Loi – the pair had met at Ashton on Mersey School, a state institution with whom United have a successful partnership close to their Carrington training ground.

Rashford had been a popular student there – after his wonder debut against Midtjylland in 2016, he went into school the next day as usual. Asked why, he explained simply, “All of my friends are here. I live across the road and I can’t drive, so I may as well come in and do my work.” Teachers tell *FFT* that he was a good pupil.

Last summer, the Red Devils appointed yet another new manager. Erik ten Hag met his staff in May and told them in detail what he wanted from them, but didn’t get his players together until the end of June.

“You must not wear a striker like Rashford out, he’s like a thoroughbred racehorse,” says McGuinness. “You didn’t see Cristiano Ronaldo running up and down the wing – Sir Alex played Wayne Rooney there in some games, to do all the running.”

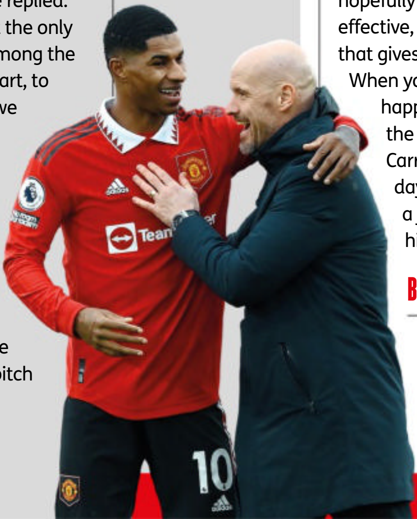
Rested and primed from private Stateside gym sessions (and not the basketball ones that caused Paul Pogba to rock up late for the previous pre-season), Rashford turned up on the first day of training “in a bad mood”, one source reveals to *FFT*. “It was like nothing had changed,” remembers the source. “But by day two it had. He started to smile again.”

The team headed to Thailand, hammered Liverpool and then moved on to Australia. In Perth, after a game against Aston Villa, this writer asked him how he felt. “I’m in a good place mentally and physically,” he replied. “I feel positive and I know I’m not the only one. There’s a joined-up feeling among the players. We want the season to start, to show what we can do. Hopefully we can start the season off a lot better. We’re better players than what we showed last year.”

Asked about his relationship with his new coach, he said, “It’s positive – he’s a positive manager who likes to play attacking football. Even when we’re defending, he wants us to be on the front foot, to squeeze the pitch and press high. The players enjoy it. When we win the ball back, we’re in a better position to score. Has pre-season been hard work? Yes, definitely. Do we enjoy it? Definitely.”

In Melbourne earlier on the same tour, Rashford got an insight into Ten Hag’s strong line on discipline when he turned up late for a team meeting and didn’t start a friendly in which he would have been included.

“One of the first things I said to him was, ‘Come to training and smile’,” Ten Hag told several journalists on Manchester United’s mid-World Cup training camp in Spain, while Rashford, back in favour with Southgate, was out in Qatar. “We bring him exercises that hopefully bring players joy. They must be effective, but there must be joy as well and that gives you energy when you’re happy. When you see the benefit of it, you can be happy. Actually, Marcus was one from the start who came with a smile to Carrington and left with a smile day by day. From the first moment, it was a joy to work with him. I recognise his talent and his finishing ability.”



Clockwise from below “I promise to not be late for another meeting”; a new celebration is getting plenty of airing; Rashford sparkled in Qatar

BETTER LATE THAN NEVER

The turnaround has been drastic under Ten Hag, but Rashford still

wasn't prolific at the start of the campaign – years ago, when a coach asked him what it would mean to score 30 goals per season, he responded, "We'd win the league title." At the start of 2022-23, he'd scored in just three of the opening 14 league matches, albeit one coming in the season-changing defeat of Liverpool after desperate early losses against Brighton and Brentford.

Just before Qatar, the self-immolating CR7 departed the club. "It's better for everyone that Ronaldo is gone," says McClair. "It's hard to get on with your own stuff when your hero growing up – and Marcus was watching Ronaldo as a scholar – becomes a team-mate and you see the reality."

Rashford had done enough, however, to earn a place in England's World Cup squad, coming on in the Three Lions' opening game against Iran and scoring inside 49 seconds, on his first international appearance since that heartbreaking Euros showpiece. When he hit the first of two goals in the last group game against Wales, he pointed to the sky, remembering friend Garfield Hayward who'd died of cancer days earlier.

Rashford has introduced a new celebration – in frequent use since a post-Qatar goal flurry – of pointing to his brain. He scored in nine of his next 10 league appearances and also struck in five cup ties, the last of which delivered United's first silverware in six years against Newcastle in the League Cup final.

Among his league goals was a superb solo strike as a substitute at Wolves on New Year's Eve. "Rashy was brilliant – we've been telling him to use his power to push past defenders and he did that," one of those watching on the United bench said while walking through the mixed zone. "He has nothing to lose. He's strong enough to do it, as he showed for the goal. If they bring him down because he's too fast for them, it's a penalty. He needs to make more combinations and he did that – did you see how he combined with Bruno Fernandes for the goal? He needs to be more direct when running at goal and he did that."

A United executive added, "Marcus is now smiling again, he's enjoying playing football again. He's concentrating on his football."

Then an unsmiling Marcus Rashford walked straight out, ignoring requests from reporters to talk. He'd come off the bench because he'd been late for a team meeting.

"When I played, you got a phone call to stop that happening," says McClair. "Or your room-mate woke you, but players don't room together any more. Ten Hag has his rules, Marcus transgressed and was punished. I saw players break the rules when I was a player, and in the end they didn't remain at the club. Win or lose, Ten Hag is doing it his way. That's great." Rashford admitted that if he'd been the manager, he would have done the same.

Instead, his team-mates were prepared to speak for him, in as glowing terms as you'd expect. "He's in a really good way," said Luke Shaw. "Extremely confident and positive. He's world class and can be one of the best players in the world if he keeps going."

This has been the most productive season of Rashford's career so far - by early March, he'd already netted 26 times for Manchester United in all competitions, four more than his previous best haul for a single campaign. At Old Trafford, the marksman has a chant in his honour: "From Wythenshawe and loves to fight. He's born to play in red and white. So listen close, it must be said. Like Manchester, Rashford is red."

"He's clearly confident and happy," states McClair. "Everything else then falls into place. He's found a balance. Going to the World Cup has helped. Rashford wasn't a certainty until Southgate picked the squad, and then he had a decent World Cup. There are other factors. You can't dismiss doing a full pre-season. Miss it and it's a big problem for a player.

"Playing all the time makes a big difference, too. The form tends to follow. Marcus is not a goalscorer in the way that Erling Haaland or Mohamed Salah are, but he'll score and he'll create. That's important for any team. His best attributes are his pace and balance. He's always had a good mentality as well. He loves playing football. It doesn't faze him to miss chances – he thinks another will come."

Neil Ryan has been impressed by just how dangerous Rashford has been this season. "Ruthless," he says. "I see someone scoring goals so regularly that it's becoming a habit. He's taking his opportunities and you back him to score. He's been a match-winner in big games. He attacks at speed, he dribbles either side, he drives inside from the left. He's lethal on the counter-attack with his pace."

His boss is no less complimentary. "From the first moment, I saw huge potential," said Ten Hag. "And now to get out the potential, I believe when Marcus' positioning is on the back of the defensive line, there is almost no better player in the world."

They're still working hard on him at United, though. Rashford enjoys evaluating with his coaches including former Champions League-winning striker Benni McCarthy. He's better in the air now, better at winning duels and was almost unplayable as a centre-forward against Barcelona in the Europa League.

"He has so much more to come," predicts McGuinness. "I like to show his January goal against Nottingham Forest in the coaches' presentations I do. He ran from the halfway line, it's so exciting and dynamic. He sprints through them all and blows them away. It was like a goal he scored in the youth team. Just imagine if he had somebody up front with him who he was better to play off?"

The club hope to answer that one in the summer transfer window, while also tying down their best forward to a new contract.

During recent months, Marcus Rashford has been busy becoming Manchester United's talisman again. If Boris Johnson ever wants another chat, he'll probably have to wait. ○

CLEAR AND PRESENT DANGER

This season, Rashford's average number of minutes per club goal has been the best of his career

2015-16	177
2016-17	279
2017-18	206
2018-19	253
2019-20	158
2020-21	197
2021-22	331
2022-23	122

Figures correct to March 11

THE TOP 50 FOOTBALL LEAGUE PLAYERS

As the season's run-in approaches, it can only mean one thing: with help from our readers, it's time for *FFT*'s annual list of the finest stars outside the top flight

AS VOTED BY THE FANS

Words and interviews
Huw Davies, Andrew Murray, Chris Evans, Gabriel Sutton, Mark White, Marcus Alves, Ed McCambridge, Richard Edwards

50 HANNIBAL MEJBRI

BIRMINGHAM CITY

POSITION MIDFIELDER **AGE** 20

In another challenging season for Birmingham, the Manchester United loanee's intense pressing has won him many a fan, either side of 10 minutes at the World Cup with Tunisia. If he channels his aggression better, he'll go far. **HIGHLIGHT** Pulling off a clever and perfectly-executed free-kick against West Brom to catch out David Button at his near post.

49 ANDY COOK

BRADFORD CITY

POSITION FORWARD **AGE** 32

Strong enough to be a focal point, skilled and mobile enough to thrive individually, 'Cookie' did threaten in patches last season but is now more consistent, with 18 league goals before March. **HIGHLIGHT** Showing strength, spirit, technique and composure to score against Gillingham after nicking the ball on the touchline.

48 PAUL SMYTH

LEYTON ORIENT

POSITION FORWARD **AGE** 25

The pacy left-winger has made 2022-23 his sizzle reel, bagging a wide array of majestic goals. **HE SAID** "It's quite strange, not scoring a worldie" – in August, referencing his wonder-strike against Barrow last March. He's since netted a 20-yard peach, a bicycle kick and a solo dribble he converted after being floored.

47 WILL COLLAR

STOCKPORT COUNTY

POSITION MIDFIELDER **AGE** 26

Dave Challinor's mad Hatters mix up their game impeccably and Collar is a big part of their push for back-to-back promotions. He's a fine passer with boundless energy in his box-to-box role. **DID YOU KNOW?** With a dozen goals, even as a No.8, he nets in bursts: five in three in December, then five in five during February.

46 DION CHARLES

BOLTON WANDERERS

POSITION FORWARD **AGE** 27

Like many strikers to rise from non-league, Charles is dogged and aggressive. He transmits his work ethic a tad more selfishly through Ian Evatt's instruction and has gained his rewards by keeping narrow: with 18 before March, he should be Bolton's first player to hit 20 goals in a season (all competitions) since 2000-01.

SERVICE
MY CAR

HOW DID WE DO IT?

***FourFourTwo* compile a list of the best players in the Football League at this time every year – and we do it by asking you, our readers.**

We polled fans of all 72 Football League clubs, from Accrington Stanley to Wycombe Wanderers, asking supporters to name the standout stars in their team's division – not including those in their own side.

Championship supporters gave us a ranking list of their top 10 players, with first place getting 10 points, second receiving nine, down to a single point for 10th.

In Leagues One and Two, supporters offered their top five, with five points for first, down to one point for fifth. The points were then totted up, and a weighting given to each division, to reveal our final half-century.

No countdown is ever met with universal agreement – we've learned that by now – so let the debate begin. If you're convinced our voters have got it utterly wrong, tell us how and why via Twitter including the hashtag:

#FLTOP50

All stats correct as of March 1

45 CONOR CHAPLIN

IPSWICH TOWN
POSITION FORWARD **AGE** 26

Having been Valerien Ismael's pressing monster in Barnsley's incredible Championship play-off campaign of 2020-21, Chaplin is the cute No.10 Kieran McKenna wanted at Ipswich: still physical, but instinctive in the final third. **THEY SAID** "Conor is the best finisher I've ever worked with" – former Ipswich boss Paul Cook.

44 TOM INCE

READING
POSITION MIDFIELDER **AGE** 31

Under his dad's guidance at the Madejski, 'young Thomas' has had one of his most consistent seasons. Previously an enigma, he now sets the tone, chasing, harrying and cajoling while also bringing his individual ability. **DID YOU KNOW?** Royals fansite The Tilehurst End awarded Ince Player of the Month four times. Anybody else fancy stepping up?

43 LAWRENCE VIGOUROUX

LEYTON ORIENT
POSITION GOALKEEPER **AGE** 29

Leyton Orient have been runaway leaders in League Two this season. What's the vibe been like?
Really, really good. I'm enjoying it. I don't do that much in games but what I have done, I felt like I've done well. I'm proud to have evolved into someone more reliable.

To what do you owe that improvement?
A lot comes down to the goalkeeping coach and the manager: they give me everything I need to prepare for the weekend, and we go by what we've seen in previous games. If I go by my instincts, I could go too high and get lobbed from the halfway line or something! [*Laughs*]

How did you find Spurs and Liverpool as a youngster?
Tottenham was amazing, training with quality players and seeing the way they took care of themselves, before sessions and after – it was mindblowing. I thought you just turned up, trained and went home! Then I went to Liverpool and the accent was different, the weather was different and I was living on my own for the first time. Training was extremely hard – I tried to take as much as I could from it. I worked with some really great players.

You say you're 'unorthodox'. Is that why fans love you?
Perry Suckling at Tottenham always said that, technically as a goalkeeper, I'm not one you'd put on a course as an example. I don't always move the right way – but as long as the ball doesn't go in, it doesn't matter. That's the main thing I took from him: just to be the kind of keeper I am. I strive to be different, but I want to be reliable.

At Swindon back in 2015, when you were 21, you made headlines for paying a £50 fine in one-penny pieces...
I was late for training and they fined me – but I'd been to the dentist and didn't really want to pay it. Because they made it tough for me, I made it tough for them and got pennies. To be fair, I took the pennies back and gave them the notes. That won't happen again. They weren't happy, but I apologised to everyone. Petulance of a child, I'd say!

You were born and raised in London, but turned out for Chile's under-20s in 2013 through family links, then had a spell with Everton de Vina del Mar in 2019. You did a Ben Brereton Diaz before it was cool!
[*Laughs*] Definitely! I was called up for Chile's senior squad in 2018, so I thought that if I moved there, I'd get in a bit more – but I wasn't really playing a lot at the club I joined. I wanted to be back in London, and then Orient needed a keeper. The experience in Chile helped me to develop as a man, though. I came back and have thoroughly enjoyed my three and a half years here.

"WHERE THE HELL IS JOE MORRELL?"

Sadly, not every club in the Football League can be represented in our top 50. Among those who just missed out: a midfielder who played at last year's World Cup and a former beach soccer international

ROSAIRE LONGELO

ACCRINGTON STANLEY
DEFENDER **AGE** 23

The bright, ball-carrying wing-back has starred on either flank following John Coleman's switch to a back three, and is now adding some vital goal contributions to Accy's relegation battle.

LUCA CONNELL

BARNSLEY
MIDFIELDER **AGE** 21

Released by Celtic, Connell is positively purring at the base of Barnsley's midfield. His left foot is artistic – look up his goal at Port Vale, scored after 25 seconds.

42 CARL PIERGIANNI

STEVENAGE

POSITION DEFENDER **AGE** 30

'Pidge', 6ft 1in, isn't League Two's tallest defender, but desire and a phenomenal leap ranks him among the best for aerial duels and in the division's top 10 – in all positions – for shots inside the box. He's an inspiration for Steve Evans' shock promotion chasers. **DID YOU KNOW?** He's the EFL's top-scoring centre-half, having netted seven goals before March.

39 BALI MUMBA

PLYMOUTH ARGYLE

POSITION DEFENDER **AGE** 21

While the wing-back has acceleration that borders on frightening, he's also well-rounded and very versatile, with a game based on more than simply attacking the flank – his touch, creativity and eye for goal make him an even greater threat veering infield. In truth, he's already good enough to play for parent club Norwich.

41 TROY PARROTT

PRESTON NORTH END

POSITION FORWARD **AGE** 21

The Tottenham striker is progressing well on loan at Preston, even if goals remain frustratingly out of reach. His pressing, dribbling and link-up play have not gone unnoticed at Deepdale since his return from an October lay-off. **THEY SAID** Boss Ryan Lowe: "His work rate is phenomenal. For his size, he's a bit of a unit inside."

38 VIKTOR JOHANSSON

ROTHERHAM UNITED

POSITION GOALKEEPER **AGE** 24

Johansson, an imposing figure and one of the Championship's top shot-stoppers, gave Millers fans a pleasant surprise when he signed a new deal to 2025, amid reported interest. He has been as reliable as he has busy. **DID YOU KNOW?** As of March 1, no other keeper in the division had racked up 100 saves this term. Johansson had made 132.

40 OWEN MOXON

CARLISLE UNITED

POSITION MIDFIELDER **AGE** 25

Paul Simpson improves players out of possession; Moxon, signed from Scotland's fourth tier, is the beneficiary. He's still the creative maestro, though, a dozen assists aiding Carlisle's promotion bid after nine years in League Two. **THEY SAID** "It's brilliant – I just hope no one reports it." Simpson tries to keep December's Player of the Month under the radar.

37 LEIF DAVIS

IPSWICH TOWN

POSITION DEFENDER **AGE** 23

Kieran McKenna has switched from 3-4-2-1 to 4-2-3-1, yet his side now get far more productivity from their left-back. Signed from Leeds for around £1 million, the Geordie has both the pace and stamina to dominate his flank, the composure to pick out good crosses and the determination to cover all his defensive bases.

BEN WHITFIELD

BARROW

FORWARD **AGE** 27

On votes, the winger would be in a League Two Team of the Season, offering five goals and 10 assists before March 1 in his first campaign above non-league since '18-19.

CALLUM CONNOLLY

BLACKPOOL

DEFENDER **AGE** 25

The problem for this bleak Blackpool side is that Connolly – superb in a vital 1-0 win against Stoke – is their leading right-back, centre-back *and* central midfielder.

SAM HUGHES

BURTON ALBION

DEFENDER **AGE** 25

After a Boxing Day win against Lincoln brought their aerial monster an injury to accompany his goal and assist, Burton lost 5-0 and then 4-0. On Hughes' return, they won three on the spin.

HARVEY KNIBBS

CAMBRIDGE UNITED

FORWARD **AGE** 23

Manager Mark Bonner hailed his talisman's "ridiculous progress" in racing back from injury to fight the drop in his fourth U's season. Their hopes rest on Knibbs.

CALLUM ROBINSON

CARDIFF CITY

FORWARD **AGE** 28

The last of Cardiff's 17 signings last summer was the most crucial. From September through February, he scored or assisted more than half of their goals.

36 ANIS MEHMETI

BRISTOL CITY
POSITION MIDFIELDER **AGE** 22

Gareth Ainsworth left his mark on Mehmeti. The dribble king responded instantly if Wycombe lost the ball, preparing him well for a return to the Championship with Bristol City. The Albanian has sublime vision and agility. **DID YOU KNOW?** He signed for Wycombe's reserves from Essex Senior League side Woodford, but was quickly a first-teamer.

35 RYAN MANNING

SWANSEA CITY
POSITION MIDFIELDER **AGE** 26

The Irish wing-back still has the forward drive he showed while at QPR, but his much improved awareness under Russell Martin has added goals to his creativity. **THEY SAID** "He's not renewing his contract – I love him, he loves it here, but we didn't address the situation properly last summer," said a miffed Martin in February.

34

SAM HOSKINS

NORTHAMPTON TOWN
POSITION MIDFIELDER **AGE** 30

BEST IN LEAGUE TWO

Congratulations on being named the best player in League Two! How does it feel?
It's nice. You always want people to recognise your efforts and your strengths. I can't take all of the credit; I know it's a cliché but my team-mates help me out enormously.

You're having your most prolific season aged 30, with 17 goals from a wide position by March. Your previous best for a campaign was 13 – why has it clicked now?
Every individual is different: you peak at different times, and while I've just turned 30 I don't feel that old, so I'd like to think I've got several years left in me yet. There isn't one specific thing I can put my finger on to say it's why I'm doing well at this age, although the manager playing me in the same position most weeks has helped me to get a lot of consistency. I've never been in such a rich vein of goalscoring form – this is my highest ever goal return. I feel as though I'm playing some of my best football.

As a midfielder, is it a surprise to find yourself in the running for the Golden Boot?
There are probably quite a few people surprised to see I've scored so many from midfield. I've always thought I had it in my locker, but it's about producing it out on the pitch. I've probably been a tad more greedy as well. Sometimes it doesn't come off and my team-mates might get a little annoyed, but a lot of the time they've been going in so they can't really complain too much!

Do you fancy Northampton's promotion chances?
It's a difficult one, because it's so tight and there are no easy games in this league. When we went to Rochdale, they were bottom but gave us a good game. We ended up scoring in the last minute for a hard-earned point, but on paper it looked like it should have been a routine win.

Last season you missed out on automatic promotion on goals scored, after Bristol Rovers won 7-0 on the final day. Does that give you an extra incentive?
Last season we put ourselves in a great position, so for those of us who were here, it gives us an edge of wanting it that bit extra – to push us over the line to get promoted. It was a freak scenario and obviously we knew there was a slim possibility of what happened happening, but we felt that if we got our own job done and won at Barrow, it would be enough. We did, but it wasn't to be. The way we started this season and put it behind us was a credit to everybody, as I'm sure many people out there would have expected that massive disappointment to have an adverse effect on us.

JESURUN RAK-SAKYI

CHARLTON ATHLETIC
FORWARD **AGE** 20

Crystal Palace are hoovering up London's best young talent: Ebere Eze, Michael Olise, and now a winger dazzling in his first loan at Charlton. Keep an eye on this one.

LEWIS FREESTONE

CHELTENHAM TOWN
DEFENDER **AGE** 23

The Robins let in 23 goals in 22 games up to Freestone's injury on New Year's Day – one of the better records in League One. After that: 10 games, 21 conceded.

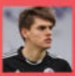
JUNIOR TCHAMADEU

COLCHESTER UNITED
DEFENDER **AGE** 19

Right-backs don't come more attacking than Tchamadeu, the latest star of a very productive U's academy. Colchester refused a Championship bid in January for their goal-hungry teenager.

TOM FELLOWS

CRAWLEY TOWN
FORWARD **AGE** 19



'Nightmarish' best describes a season with three managers (so far) and at least six different positions, but Crawley's West Brom loanee has acquitted himself well.

ROD McDONALD

CREWE ALEXANDRA
DEFENDER **AGE** 30

McDonald's firm defensive displays have been even more vital to Crewe since star keeper Arthur Okonkwo was recalled by Arsenal and loaned to Sturm Graz.

33 JOSH WINDASS

SHEFFIELD WEDNESDAY

POSITION FORWARD **AGE** 29

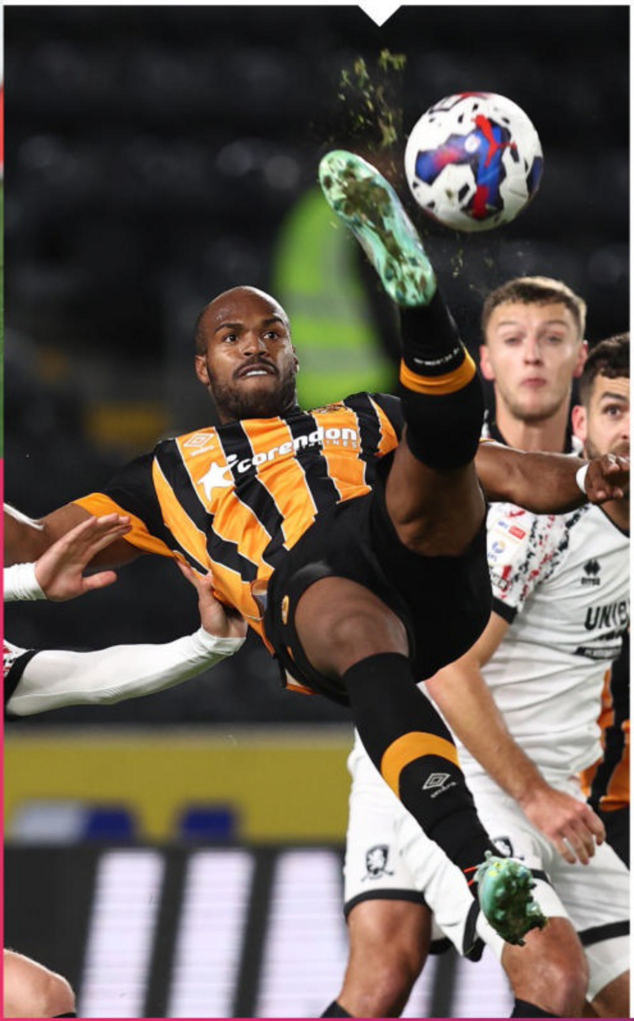
Playing off Michael Smith, Windass loses defenders with ease. He opened 2023 with five goals in a week by knocking Newcastle out of the FA Cup after hitting a hat-trick against Cambridge. **HE SAID** "I got bored of absolute numpties giving their opinions on football when they have no clue about it" – on quitting Twitter.

32 OSCAR ESTUPINAN

HULL CITY

POSITION FORWARD **AGE** 26

Fans couldn't believe their luck when Hull signed the Portuguese top tier's fifth-leading goalscorer from 2021-22, especially when he struck seven times in August to become Championship Player of the Month. The goals slowed but the Colombian's effort didn't. **HIGHLIGHT** An absurd first-time hooked volley of a last-minute equaliser against Huddersfield.



31 DAVID McGOLDRICK

DERBY COUNTY

POSITION FORWARD **AGE** 35

Restricted to signing free agents, the Rams had to act smart – and they don't come smarter than 'Didzy'. The experienced, elusive forward has given Derby class and guile – and, even at 35, the odd turn of pace – as well as 20 league goal involvements so far. **HIGHLIGHT** Scoring his first ever hat-trick, so late in his career. And then a second. And a third.

30 ROSS STEWART

SUNDERLAND

POSITION FORWARD **AGE** 26

Blessed with two great nicknames ('Loch Ness Drogba' and 'Highland Haaland'), Stewart was cursed with two cruel injuries, breaking up his 10 goals and three assists from just 13 league games, then ending his season in January. **DID YOU KNOW?** He averaged a Championship-best 0.86 goals per 90 minutes this campaign.

29 TEEMU PUKKI

NORWICH CITY

POSITION FORWARD **AGE** 33

One word defines the fabulous Finn in this division: inevitable. At 33, Pukki remains a menace to defenders with his one-touch shooting and eye for an open team-mate. In a season he'd call disappointing, he still offered 17 goals and assists before March. **HE SAID** "I've always felt loved at Norwich." Will he be kept on?

28 CARLTON MORRIS

LUTON TOWN

POSITION FORWARD **AGE** 27

Simultaneously a club-record signing and an absolute bargain at around £2m, Morris arrived from relegated Barnsley to be the perfect striker for Luton's renewed play-off charge: strong, mobile and newly prolific. He'd been with Norwich aged 11 to 25 but played for them just once due to endless loans away; now settled, he's oozing confidence.

HARRISON BIGGINS

DONCASTER ROVERS

MIDFIELDER **AGE** 27

A sumptuous free-kick past the Rochdale keeper; an unbelievable half-volley at Grimsby; hitting Stevenage's bar from his own half – the spectacular is his trade.

SAM NOMBE

EXETER CITY

FORWARD **AGE** 24

Linking nicely with Jevani Brown and contributing to 16 goals even before 2023 began, Nombe has been one of tier three's best strikers since Exeter came up.

SHAUN ROONEY

FLEETWOOD TOWN

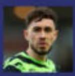
DEFENDER **AGE** 26

Scott Brown smuggled the right-back south of the border and has been rewarded with six goals, three assists and a four-match ban for, in the gaffer's words, "starting World War Three". Oof.

COREY O'KEEFFE

FOREST GREEN ROVERS

DEFENDER **AGE** 24



Forest Green's title win was driven by two great wing-backs – then both left. O'Keeffe joined and has filled a slot well, taking on full-backs and racking up seven assists.

27

CONOR HOURIHANE

DERBY COUNTY
POSITION MIDFIELDER **AGE** 32

Have you enjoyed your time at Pride Park this season?
It's been really good. We're in a decent league position, it's a great group of lads and the club has unbelievable support, home and away. That was actually one of the biggest reasons for me signing: we're getting crowds of more than 25,000 at home matches in the third tier. It's a massive club and I've enjoyed my time at Derby so far.

Would anything less than promotion be a failure?
I'd be lying if I said that wasn't the case. When I moved here last summer, the ambition straight away was to get promoted. I knew it wouldn't be easy, with the issues the club have gone through and the big rebuild that was required, but we've done very well and we're in the mix.

You've secured promotion twice before, with Barnsley and Aston Villa – could your experience be crucial?
I think you have to bring that experience to the table, if you've been through it before. There are a few players in the Derby dressing room who have been involved in promotions in the past, and that can only help us.

Have you relished being an example to the younger players in the squad?
Yeah, that comes with age – I take pride in how I handle myself and the high standards I set. I think the younger lads know I'm always around to lend a hand when I can, both on and off the pitch; I always try to make the effort to speak to them and see how they are. I've been in their shoes before, so I know that I have the experience to help if they need anything.

You'd spent the past six years in the top two tiers, so what prompted the move down to League One?
I turned 32 in February, and I've been really fortunate to play for some big clubs in my career. Before the season began, I was asking myself: 'What would excite me in my next move?' Derby came along and I viewed it as a great opportunity to help a huge club to rebuild and get back to where they belong. It ticked every box.

The club were in administration before their summer takeover. Did you see the move as a bit of a gamble?
I wasn't able to sign until the takeover was completed, so actually there was a real buzz around the club and the training ground by the time I arrived. From the start, I felt the club was going to be moving in the right direction, and that has been the case. It's been a brilliant move for me: I've played a lot of matches and scored a few goals. Now I just hope we can finish the job and win promotion.

26 MICHAEL COOPER

PLYMOUTH ARGYLE
POSITION GOALKEEPER **AGE** 23

Rarely does a terrific goalkeeper play 120 League One games before being poached. If Argyle pull off an incredible promotion, their match-winning local hero will be why; if they don't, his February injury will be why not. **DID YOU KNOW?** He'd prevented a league-high 6.8 goals (per xG) before his untimely knee knack.

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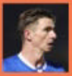
25 MARCELINO NUNEZ

NORWICH CITY
POSITION MIDFIELDER **AGE** 23
The scuttling schemer's strong start faded, after 12 months of non-stop football due to Chile's calendar. February's goal of the season contender against Birmingham helped to reignite his first campaign in England. **DID YOU KNOW?** Nunez made his Championship debut six days after playing in Chile, then played for Norwich five times in 14 days.

OLI HAWKINS

GILLINGHAM **AGE** 30
DEFENDER/FORWARD



The goal-shy Gills have been unrecognisable since buying a strike pair of Hawkins – a defender at Mansfield – and Tom Nichols. One holds it up; the other puts it away.

HARRY CLIFTON

GRIMSBY TOWN
MIDFIELDER **AGE** 24
A local lad who's been with the club since he was a boy, this versatile, hard-working midfielder is the on-pitch avatar for match-going Mariners in the stands. He scores some useful goals, too.

LUKE ARMSTRONG

HARROGATE TOWN
FORWARD **AGE** 26

Few strikers top a league's rankings for close-range shots *and* aerial duels won (nine per game), and he also bagged a trio of braces late last year. Eclectic.

JOSH UMERAH

HARTLEPOOL UNITED
FORWARD **AGE** 26

With a fine all-round game and goals to boot, the marksman has almost had to carry relegation-threatened Pools since joining from Wealdstone last July.

24 AARON COLLINS

BRISTOL ROVERS
POSITION FORWARD **AGE** 25

Step up? What step up? After representing six teams in League Two, Collins has been effortlessly brilliant in his first stab at League One – quick, creative and clinical. **DID YOU KNOW?** The Welshman reached 'the double double' (10 goals, 10 assists) on January 1. Two months later, no one else in the whole EFL had managed it.

23 JED WALLACE

WEST BROMWICH ALBION
POSITION FORWARD **AGE** 29

The legendary Lion became a Baggie and emerged with credit from Steve Bruce's lackadaisical reign before thriving for Carlos Corberan. Loved for his industry, leadership and off-pitch work, Wallace has real quality as well. **HIGHLIGHT** A millimetre-perfect cross, while sprinting, for Daryl Dike's clincher at Sunderland.

22 DAN BARLASER

MIDDLESBROUGH
POSITION MIDFIELDER **AGE** 26

Returning to his native North East in January after his Rotherham performances wowed Boro, the 'Geordie Pirlo' dictates the pace of a game with an elan that few in the Championship can match. **HIGHLIGHT** A first-half hat-trick of assists, with two laser-guided passes from deep, in the Millers' 4-0 August mauling of Reading.

21 JONSON CLARKE-HARRIS

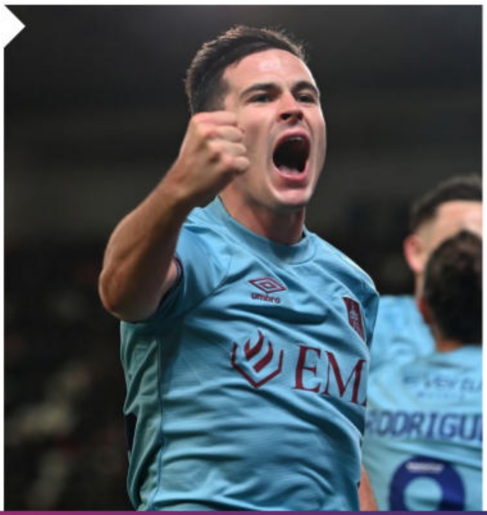
PETERBOROUGH UNITED
POSITION FORWARD **AGE** 28

Though Peterborough haven't matched high expectations, their captain is clinical in open play and deadly from 12 yards (penalties make up a quarter of his career tally for the Posh). He's set for a second League One Golden Boot – one for each foot. **DID YOU KNOW?** Call him 'The Orthodontist', because he has five braces this season already.

20 JOSH CULLEN

BURNLEY
POSITION MIDFIELDER **AGE** 26

Vincent Kompany knew that his Anderlecht midfielder was worth more than £3m. After his debut against Huddersfield in the EFL's curtain-raiser, so did Sky viewers. Selfless, smart, strong, creative and producing moments of pure brilliance, Cullen's been integral to Burnley's style and success. **THEY SAID** "He's the ultimate player" – Kompany in January.



19 ZIAN FLEMMING

MILLWALL
POSITION MIDFIELDER **AGE** 24

Gary Rowett knew what he had to do after losing *FFT*'s No.23 on a free transfer. "Jed is a unique player," the Lions boss said of the man who scored or assisted 57 goals in Rowett's near-three seasons at the Den. "We must replace his goals and assists."

And they did. Millwall spent a club-record £1.7m on Zian Flemming, whose dozen goals in 28 Eredivisie games had saved Fortuna Sittard from relegation by a single point. It was unusual for an outfit synonymous with recruiting domestic players to sign a rangy, technical operator with the close control of one schooled in Ajax's academy. In October, however, Flemming's credentials were confirmed at Rotherham by a savage 25-yard rocket using his 'weaker' left foot. Three goals in 10 days followed.

Rowett installed Flemming as creator-in-chief for striker Tom Bradshaw, to devastating effect. In February, Rowett said, "The price we paid was a snip... he's got character, physicality and that game-changing quality." The dribbling Dutchman's big impact – earning a Den chant of, "He comes from Amsterdam; he f**king hates West Ham" – is such that he's also consulted by his manager on tactical matters.

"He's a very intelligent player – you tell him and he can action those instructions on the pitch," said Rowett after they discussed changes en route to the dressing room against Stoke. Flemming's second-half winner was his 12th goal in a great first term. Almost *too* great. Rowett called him "the sort of player I'd expect to see in the Premier League". Lions fans can only hope it's with them.

LEE NICHOLLS

HUDDERSFIELD TOWN
GOALKEEPER **AGE** 30

Just like the Terriers, Nicholls isn't reaching the stellar heights of last season – though he has been keeping their survival hopes alive, only one campaign on from the play-off final.

REGAN POOLE

LINCOLN CITY
DEFENDER **AGE** 24

Now Lincoln's captain, the Welshman is capable as a wing-back or centre-half in a back five, and he has worked on his delivery to add a threat as the former.

GEORGE MARIS

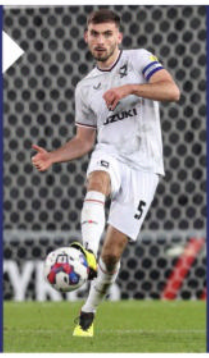
MANSFIELD TOWN
MIDFIELDER **AGE** 27

Superb with Cambridge and now as consistent as anybody in Nigel Clough's Stags team, Maris deserves promotion in his seventh season in League Two.

WARREN O'HORA

MK DONS
DEFENDER **AGE** 23

The Dublin-born central defender's ultra-smooth passing was a rare joy in a miserable campaign for MK – at least until a January injury ended his season early. They'll miss him in the run-in.



BEST IN LEAGUE ONE

18 BARRY BANNAN

SHEFFIELD WEDNESDAY
POSITION MIDFIELDER **AGE** 33

Congratulations – fans of League One clubs have voted you as the division's top player! How does that feel?
It's a great honour. Receiving an accolade means you're doing your job well, and we're in football to win things.

Sheffield Wednesday look in very good shape to secure promotion at the second attempt this year…
We were chasing from quite far out this time last season, so we've learned from that and then improved a lot since. We've put ourselves in a great position, but we won't get complacent: we know the job is nowhere near done yet.

What has changed since last year, when you finished fourth in Wednesday's first season after relegation and lost to Sunderland in the play-off semi-finals?
It took us a while to get going – we were probably caught by surprise when we didn't really know what the division was about. It threw many different things at us that we couldn't deal with. From the second part of last term and most of this one, we've learned it's a demanding league, a physical league, and we need to work extremely hard to pick up results. We've added players who know what it takes to get out of this league, which has helped as well.

How do you feel your own campaign has gone so far?
I was injured over Christmas and it was a bit stop-start, so I didn't enjoy that, but the team was winning, which is the most important thing. Personally, I feel that I've done all right, but I want to do better and hope that I can stay fit and finish the campaign really strongly.

That's very modest for the best player in the division! You've been with Sheffield Wednesday since 2015 and the fans absolutely love you. What does that feel like?
Amazing. I'm lucky I'm at a club with a big fanbase and brilliant support – I'm privileged to play in front of them every week. When the fans take to you in the way they've taken to me, and sing my name, it's an incredible feeling to go out there and play football. That's why we love the game. Other than scoring a goal, there's no better feeling.

You're 33 years old, so do you see yourself finishing your career at Hillsborough?
Yeah. I'm not getting any younger, but I feel fine and have played a lot of games in the past couple of years, so age isn't catching up with me yet. I feel fit, young and healthy. I'm happy here, and I want to get promotion this season.

17 ALEX SCOTT

BRISTOL CITY **AGE** 19
POSITION MIDFIELDER

Pointing Spider-Man memes flooded Twitter as the Guernsey Grealish met the real thing in an FA Cup tie with Manchester City. Scott shares the low-slung socks, sinuous skill and England future. **THEY SAID** "The way Alex glides over the pitch, I see why people compare him to Jack," said the Robins' Andi Weimann, who was also with Grealish at Aston Villa.

16 ANASS ZAROURY

BURNLEY
POSITION FORWARD **AGE** 22

Kompany paid fees to bring nine players from Belgium to Burnley – and who can blame him? £3.5m Zaroury is developing as rapidly as he dribbles: he got called up for Belgium U21s in September, earned his first Clarets start in October and went to the World Cup with Morocco in November. **DID YOU KNOW?** He first played 11-a-side at 16, due to Brussels' technique-focused academies.

CONNOR RIPLEY

MORECAMBE
GOALKEEPER **AGE** 30

A first-choice keeper for the first time in his career, Ripley is making waves in a division flush with top glovesmen. By March, he'd saved five (!) of eight penalties faced.

PRIESTLEY FARQUHARSON

NEWPORT COUNTY
DEFENDER **AGE** 26

He's a former beach soccer international who also went to Brunel University – but more usefully for Newport, Farquharson is a strong, quick, classy defender.

CAMERON BRANNAGAN

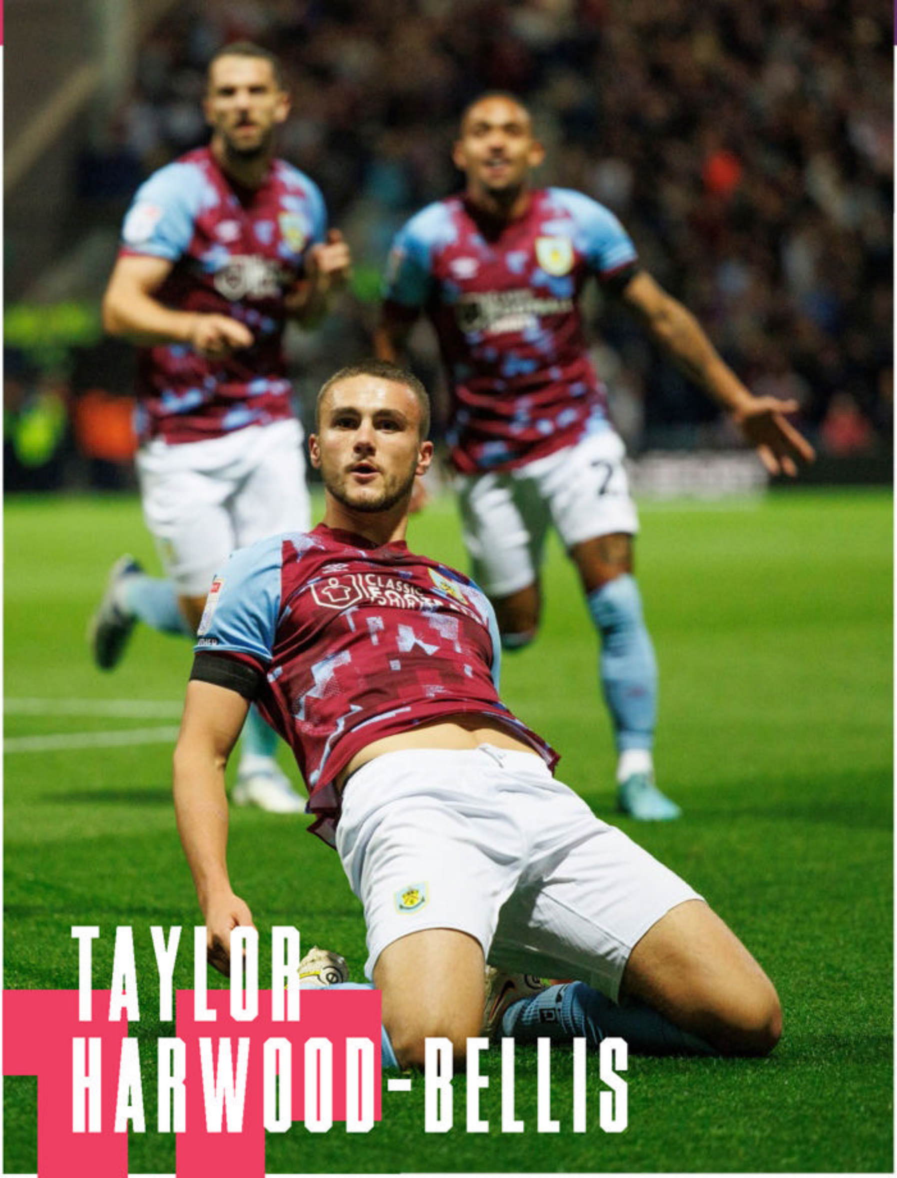
OXFORD UNITED
MIDFIELDER **AGE** 26

"I really love it here," said the midfielder as he inked a new Oxford deal last July despite Blackpool triggering his release clause. He's still the Yellows' Mr Reliable.

NATHAN SMITH

PORT VALE
DEFENDER **AGE** 26

Smith's solidity and aerial dominance have helped Vale in their – and his – first campaign in League One since way back in 2016-17. Some 300 appearances later, he's a club legend.



15

TAYLOR HARWOOD-BELLIS

BURNLEY
POSITION DEFENDER **AGE** 21

Could your loan from Manchester City have gone any better, as Burnley charge clear of the Championship?
You always hope that a loan spell turns out like this one! But having worked before with the manager, Vincent Kompany, I didn't doubt that we'd have a good season.

How has it been to play under Kompany for a second time, after your loan spell at Anderlecht last season?
I'd never have dreamed of playing under him when I was younger. It's fantastic to know that I could go to him with anything, football-related, and he'd have an answer. He's made it clear what he wants from me, how he wants me to do it and how I can get better at it. And you'll be on the training pitch until you've perfected it – that's just how he is. It's a massive help to know you've got that as a player.

How invaluable was your time in Belgium?
I was nervous at first – more nervous than when I made any other debut – just because it was new. No one knew who I was; it was almost like starting again. But I'm glad I did it, because it made me stronger mentally. I'm trying to work smarter now, which the gaffer spoke to me about. When I first moved to Belgium, I was trying to win every single header – even headers I was never going to win. Now I win a much higher percentage of headers, because I'm not competing for quite as many. As the manager was a central defender, he can tell you the tricks he learned.

How important has Kompany been to Burnley?
I doubt there's a manager who works harder. The detail he goes into, his knowledge, his tactics and the way he explains things are all key. Everyone says he makes the game so simple. And you can tell the impact that he's had from the way we play and the results we've enjoyed.

Pep Guardiola said recently that he expects Kompany to manage Manchester City one day. Can you see that?
I don't see why not. He's more than capable of managing one of the biggest teams in the world. Everyone assumes he wants to be the City manager, because of the love he has for City, but I've never asked him. For him, you could have the biggest match in the world in two weeks' time, but if he has a friendly beforehand, all he'll think about is that friendly and how we're going to win that match. He's so focused on the next thing that's coming up, and that mentality rubs off on the group.

Aged 14, you were part of the club's welcome party for Guardiola's first day, in 2016. What was that like?
It was the captains of City's under-15s, under-18s and under-21s – I was the U15s captain, and it was a brilliant experience to be up on the stage alongside him. I spent half a season training full-time with the first team under Guardiola when we came back from COVID, and I learned so much about every part of the game. Those six months helped me hugely, training with the best players and the best coach. He's what everyone thinks in terms of his love for football, determination, hard work and detail.

You had a loan with Burnley's fierce rivals, Blackburn, in 2021. How did you find the derby this season?
The atmosphere at Turf Moor was class. You could feel the hatred between them both, all the way through the game. It was great to win. You could see what it meant to people – the whole place was buzzing. What a day.

What do you expect to happen next season?
There's not been much talk about next year. We want to get over the line first; I'm not focusing on anything other than winning promotion and being champions. I'll discuss the plan with City and Burnley, but if someone said to me, "You're going to go back to Burnley in the Premier League next season", that would excite me. I've grown such a big connection with the club and the fans. I just love it here.

JOE MORRELL
PORTSMOUTH
MIDFIELDER **AGE** 26

After a tough first half to 2022-23, the press-resistant passer is thriving at Pompey once again and braced to be Joe Allen's permanent midfield heir for Wales.

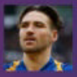
IAN HENDERSON
ROCHDALE
FORWARD **AGE** 38

The returning talisman became Dale's all-time top scorer in November, although he'd rather not have set this record during a desperate fight to avoid the club's first ever drop to non-league.

ELLIOT WATT
SALFORD CITY
MIDFIELDER **AGE** 23

Watt was very unfortunate to miss out on our countdown – let's call him the unofficial No.51 – having notched a league-high 13 assists by the end of February.

LUKE LEAHY
SHREWSBURY TOWN
MIDFIELDER **AGE** 30



January's League One Player of the Month – the first Shrew in seven years to win such an award – has skippered his side into the top half with drive.

LEWIS BAKER
STOKE CITY
MIDFIELDER **AGE** 27

The perennial ex-Chelsea loanee (and offspring of a champion powerlifter) finally has a permanent home, and is showing his passing vision and eye for goal.

14 ANEL AHMEDHODZIC

SHEFFIELD UNITED
POSITION DEFENDER **AGE** 24

A tall, Bosnian-Swede from Malmo, just like Zlatan Ibrahimovic but representing the Balkan nation, the centre-back combines strong tackling and smooth technique. He scored twice against Reading in August with a perfect volley and a tricky, twisting header.

HE SAID "If we don't win, I feel depressed until the next game."

13 BEN BRERETON DIAZ

BLACKBURN ROVERS
POSITION FORWARD **AGE** 23

The Stoke-born Chilean couldn't top a 2021-22 campaign that began with a South American Pepsi ad and ended with 22 league goals – especially now defenders know his in-to-out runs, er, inside-out – but he's still a deadly finisher.

HIGHLIGHT An unstoppable hit against Sunderland, struck from 20 yards with his weaker foot.

12 SANDER BERGE

SHEFFIELD UNITED
POSITION MIDFIELDER **AGE** 25

Half of the Premier League were sniffing around the Norwegian midfielder in January, hoping to take advantage of the Blades' financial woes. Berge, now given more attacking freedom, stayed put and had posted five goals and three assists before March, with his powerful runs standing out following a patchy 2021-22.

11 IAN MAATSEN

BURNLEY
POSITION DEFENDER **AGE** 21

After catching the eye at Coventry, Chelsea's rampaging wing-back being loaned to rampant Burnley was a recipe for fun. Playing in a back four without the ball, he has preserved his threat with it, offering nine goal contributions.

HE SAID "These video reveals are getting worse", as Burnley's socials had Minions unveil him.

10 ISMAILA SARR

WATFORD
POSITION FORWARD **AGE** 25

While not in ace form, his 15 Championship goal involvements up to March 1 show why teams fear even a below-par Sarr. He might be Chris Wilder's trump card in the play-off scramble: Senegal's best World Cup since 2002 was partly down to him turning it on.

DID YOU KNOW? In four Hornets seasons, he's had 10 managers.

09 ILIAS CHAIR

QPR **AGE** 25
POSITION MIDFIELDER

Chair has had quite the season, with ups, downs and managers aplenty. But amid a rollercoaster 2022-23 that has taken him from the highs of a World Cup semi-final in Qatar, with surprise packages Morocco, to the lows of a winter winless streak that left QPR looking nervously at the wrong end of the Championship standings, Chair has been giving sleepless nights to second-tier defenders left, right and centre.

Yet that's nothing new. Since Ebere Eze departed Loftus Road for Crystal Palace in the summer of 2020, Chair has stepped up to the plate and become QPR's creative heartbeat, adding hard work to his flair and ingenuity. He takes a mean free-kick, too: just ask Middlesbrough keeper Zack Steffen, who was caught out by the miniature maestro's quick thinking and accuracy from a seemingly unthreatening position during QPR's February defeat at the Riverside Stadium.

In a campaign that kicked off promisingly for the Super Hoops but tailed off after manager Michael Beale left for Rangers, Chair nevertheless sat clear at the top of the Championship's rankings for most chances created by the start of March, with 77. He was deservedly called up to Morocco's 2022 World Cup squad, and the Atlas Lions sensationally became the first African nation to reach the semi-finals, upsetting Belgium, Spain and Portugal en route.

While Chair's only minutes came in the third-place play-off against Croatia, he has since spoken about the unforgettable experience of being part of such a historic moment. QPR fans will hope it inspires Chair to more highs before the season is out.

ROB MILSOM

SUTTON UNITED
DEFENDER **AGE** 36

You'd never guess Milsom is 36 from his evergreen left-back displays. The dead-ball specialist's impeccable delivery has put Sutton into play-off contention.

JONNY WILLIAMS

SWINDON TOWN
MIDFIELDER **AGE** 29

Still in his twenties, still too good for this level and still loved in Wales even after international retirement, 'Joniesta' is scoring goals, winning fouls and – to Swindon's credit – avoiding injury.

ETHAN BRISTOW

TRANMERE ROVERS
DEFENDER **AGE** 21

Tranmere's full-backs, Bristow and Josh Dacres-Cogley, are bright sparks in a badly underperforming team. The left-sided youngster just about gets the nod.

ISAAC HUTCHINSON

WALSALL
MIDFIELDER **AGE** 22

Often saddled with being the Saddlers' only source of creativity, the young No.10 has begun to feel the strain after putting in a number of match-winning displays.

AMAD DIALLO

08

SUNDERLAND
POSITION FORWARD **AGE** 20

How have you found life on loan at Sunderland?
Very good. Sunderland have made me feel very welcome since I arrived here and I'm really enjoying my football. The club has shown a great deal of confidence in me, so I'm doing my best to repay their faith.

You moved to Manchester United from Atalanta for a reported initial fee of £19m in 2021, aged 18, but have been introduced gradually to first-team action and didn't always play when on loan at Rangers last term. Is regular football helping your development?
It's important for any player to get minutes on the pitch, especially for young players. Football is about confidence, but you need to play to build up that confidence and I'm pleased that Sunderland are giving me that chance now. I want to get as much as I can out of this loan and keep doing well for Sunderland. That will help me to return to Manchester a better footballer.

You were named the EFL's young player of the month in December. What have been your other highlights?
I was delighted and proud to receive that award – it has given me a lot of belief in myself. My performance against Birmingham was a highlight as well: I scored a beautiful goal in that match. That was a brilliant moment for me, and I also got an assist. At the start of the season, I set myself a target of scoring 10 league goals – I managed six in the first half of the season, so I want to try to beat that in the second half. My objective has always been to help Sunderland make it back into the Premier League. It will be hard, but nothing is impossible.

Sunderland are known for their passionate support. What's it like to play in front of such huge crowds at a club in the second division?
Amazing. The supporters give us a lot of energy. It's great to play every game with those fans behind us. Regardless of whether we're home or away, they bring passion. That helps us to win games but also, when we lose, they stand with us. Manchester United have an even bigger stadium, so it's good practice for me.

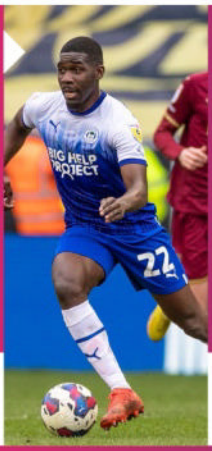
What did United say to you when they suggested this loan? Did you have to think carefully about dropping into the Championship?
When I heard about the chance to move to Sunderland, I spoke to Erik ten Hag to ask him if I could come, because I knew I'd have the opportunity to play more games and it would be good for me. I also spoke to [technical director] Darren Fletcher and he agreed that Sunderland would be beneficial for my development. Since I've been here, he's messaged me a lot to see how I'm getting on. He sends his congratulations when I score a goal or put in a good performance. It's nice to know he's watching and making sure everything's OK.

How excited were you to sign for Manchester United? Did you feel any pressure because of the price tag?
I know it was a lot of money, but I didn't really think about that – there's no reason to worry about things you can't influence. I was so happy to sign for Manchester United. It's a club with a massive history, famous all around the world. I remember my first training session after I joined. I was very nervous. There were some huge stars in the dressing room and I was looking around, thinking, 'Wow, I can't believe I'm here'. Paul Pogba and Edinson Cavani were at the club at the time and it was fantastic to meet them. I have a good friendship with Pogba, and also with Bruno Fernandes and Anthony Elanga. They all made me feel welcome. It was incredible to make my debut against Real Sociedad in the Europa League, too. I haven't shown my best for them yet, but I hope next season I can return and prove my talent. My dream is to play regular football at Manchester United.

CHRIST TIEHI

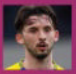
WIGAN ATHLETIC
MIDFIELDER **AGE** 24

Inviting jokes regarding divine intervention, Tiehi was loaned from Slovan Liberec in January to be the Latics' saviour. Alas, his midfield grit may not prove enough to protect them from relegation.



ETHAN CHISLETT

AFC WIMBLEDON
MIDFIELDER **AGE** 24



As if it wasn't enough to have excellent technique and the skill to both find and create space, the South African has also scored three free-kicks in 2022-23.

DAVID WHEELER

WYCOMBE WANDERERS
MIDFIELDER **AGE** 32

Although Josh Scowen also has a strong case, the PFA's sustainability champion is pulling up metaphorical trees for the Chairboys. He's flexible, hard-working and dominant in the air.

07

JOAO PEDRO

WATFORD
POSITION FORWARD **AGE** 21

Your former Watford boss, Slaven Bilic, said you don't "talk, walk or think like a 21-year-old kid". So, how did you adjust to life in England when you arrived at 18?
England is a very different country, so adapting to a new place has its challenges. When I left Brazil, I was getting regular football at Fluminense and beginning to make a name for myself – so to arrive here and not play much at first, not knowing how to communicate, having to deal with the cold, being away from friends and family… it was difficult. Leaving your comfort zone is never easy, but it's allowed me to learn another culture. I now speak English and fully understand it. When you move abroad aged 18, it's easier to absorb it all than if I had done it at 21 or 22. I'm experienced now, and wearing the captain's armband this campaign has meant a lot to me.

Did that surprise you?
It was actually very funny! [*Laughs*] I was returning from injury and had played 30 minutes or so in the previous game, so I was expecting to start again on the bench, but the coach said, "I think you should start today." I was like, "No, I'd prefer to play the second half: the match will be more open and I'll be able to create more chances." We discussed it and agreed it was best that I started – what I didn't know was that he'd planned to make me captain that day! When I saw the armband I said, "No, not me – take it to Tom Cleverley." [*Laughs*] It was a great gesture.

You followed in the footsteps of Richarlison by moving from Fluminense to Watford. Do you know each other?
Yeah, I speak to him very often. Recently, Luva de Pedreiro [a Brazilian influencer] was visiting London and they were preparing a barbecue at Emerson Royal's house, so they invited me to hang out. It was Richarlison, Emerson Royal, Lucas Moura, Luva and me. We get together whenever we have a chance.

When Richarlison got to Watford, Heurelho Gomes had to buy him new clothes. Did that also happen to you?
Not like that! [*Laughs*] My mum and late stepfather came to see the stadium, the training ground and [owner] Gino Pozzo. When they got back to Brazil, they told me, "We're going to buy a lot of winter clothes, because it's very cold there." The entire team welcomed me, which was great, even though they couldn't understand a word I said. But Gomes especially went above and beyond, driving me to training, translating to the physio – I wasn't able to speak to anyone but I was eager to make my debut, so I would ask Gomes to talk to the coach about it. He would do that and tell me what the coach had said.

Have you met Elton John?
I did when we were promoted to the Premier League in 2021. He came to the dressing room after the game and handed out some player of the year awards.

Do you listen to his songs?
With all respect to him, I prefer Brazilian music! [*Laughs*]

What are your future plans? You were one of the most talked about names in last summer's transfer window.
Yeah, I hope to continue making some noise during the transfer window! [*Laughs*] It shows that I'm doing things the correct way, but my priority now is to help Watford.

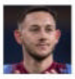
06 NATHAN TELLA

BURNLEY
POSITION FORWARD **AGE** 23

Southampton's call to loan out Tella aged even worse than their appointment of Nathan Jones. Burnley may pass Tella's parent club on their way up, thanks to the former gymnastics prodigy's effervescent displays in attack. **HIGHLIGHT** A first ever hat-trick, at Preston, including an exquisite strike with his weaker left foot.

05 JOSH BROWNHILL

BURNLEY
POSITION MIDFIELDER **AGE** 27



After two goals in 78 top-flight appearances for Burnley, Brownhill got four in his first six following relegation. A No.8 in shirt and role, he accepted a new licence to attack from midfield; then the forwards hit form and he moved back to set them up instead. **DID YOU KNOW?** He leads the league for goal-creating actions.

04 OLIVER NORWOOD

SHEFFIELD UNITED
POSITION MIDFIELDER **AGE** 31

The consistent conduit through which United's easy-on-the-eye play has passed since 2018, and a gifted technician and dead-ball specialist who's also won more tackles than any other player in the division, Norwood does it all. **DID YOU KNOW?** He played youth cricket for the same team, Burnley, as England's legendary Test bowler Jimmy Anderson.

03

ILIMAN NDIAYE

SHEFFIELD UNITED
POSITION FORWARD **AGE** 23

Iliman Ndiaye's rise from YouTube footballer to World Cup star has been rapid, but it's no surprise to anyone who has seen the Sheffield United forward in full flow.

The Senegal international was playing in non-league three years ago and made his maiden start for the Blades only at the start of last season, yet he's now universally recognised as one of the second tier's top talents.

Things didn't look so promising after unsuccessful trials with Chelsea and Southampton left the former Boreham Wood youth-teamer hoping to get noticed by turning out for YouTubers Rising Ballers. The plan paid off, and since joining Sheffield United in the summer of 2019, Ndiaye's determination has come to the fore – not to mention his ever-increasing ability, from his excellent weight of pass to his finishing in congested central areas.

After a loan spell at seventh-tier Hyde United, Ndiaye made his Blades debut in the Premier League at the end of the 2020-21 campaign. Relegation opened a window of opportunity for the youngster and he bewitched defences on his way to registering seven goals in 35 Championship appearances last term, using the fancy moves he learned from training with his choreographer father.

Ndiaye has kicked on again this term, averaging a goal contribution every other game – including five assists, each of them vital, in four league matches straight after the World Cup – and netting several times in Sheffield United's attempt to return to the Premier League. He also starred for Senegal in Qatar, coming off the bench to assist the third goal in a 3-1 win over the hosts, in only his third international cap at any level. That earned him a starting berth in the Lions of Teranga's final two encounters of the tournament, against Ecuador and England.

Those performances haven't gone unnoticed, and after reportedly being a target for Everton in January, Ndiaye is sure to have more Premier League suitors vying for his signature this summer, even if Sheffield United go up first.

02

CHUBA AKPOM

MIDDLESBROUGH
POSITION FORWARD **AGE** 27

It seems scarcely believable that Akpom was poised for the Middlesbrough exit last summer. But after the Teessiders failed to land all of Chris Wilder's transfer targets, the frontman grasped his chance and is now a mainstay in Michael Carrick's starting XI.

This campaign has been his most prolific by a distance. Having never previously hit double figures during a league season, Akpom reached that landmark on Boxing Day. He has been deadly since the über-attacking Carrick replaced Wilder at the Riverside in October, scoring 18 goals in the former Manchester United midfielder's first 20 games in the dugout, as Boro turned third-from-bottom into third. It has moved the former England U21 international well clear in the race for the Championship Golden Boot, and he isn't even playing as an out-and-out striker.

Akpom, 27, finally seems to be delivering on the promise he showed as a teenager at Arsenal. He made a handful of appearances for the Gunners' first team but spent most of his time out on loan, failing to set the world alight in any of his five short spells at Brentford, Coventry, Nottingham Forest, Hull and Brighton.

Prior to this campaign, Akpom's best work came abroad, first at Belgium's Sint-Truiden and then in Greece, where he was part of an historic PAOK side. In his debut season, the Londoner helped PAOK to win the double, scoring the only goal of the 2019 Greek Cup Final a week after they'd clinched their first top-flight title in 34 years – unbeaten.

Despite that success, a return to England in 2020 with Middlesbrough seemed to be heading southwards when Akpom went back to PAOK on loan last term, before being touted for a transfer. Given his heroics since, it's unlikely Boro will be allowing Akpom to leave again any time soon.

01

COVENTRY CITY
POSITION FORWARD **AGE** 24

VIKTOR GYOKERES

There's no better feeling than being loved. Just ask Viktor Gyokeres.

The Coventry striker has transformed from misfiring loanee to one of the Championship's hottest properties over 18 goal-laden months in the Midlands, and he puts all of his recent success down to feeling the warm embrace he has received there.

Being voted *FourFourTwo*'s best player in the Football League seemed a long way off for Gyokeres as recently as 2020-21 when, having been unable to set Germany's second tier on fire with St Pauli, he then scored just three goals in a combined 30 Championship loan appearances for Swansea and Coventry. Although that paltry return didn't convince his parent club, Brighton, that Gyokeres warranted a chance in the Premier League, Sky Blues boss Mark Robins saw enough in the Sweden international's performances to sanction a £1 million transfer in July 2021.

Gyokeres has repaid that faith and then some. Since becoming a permanent member of Coventry's squad, he has developed into their talisman, plundering 18 times in all competitions last season and almost topping that total before spring this term as City launched a remarkable play-off assault – remarkable in that they'd had to wait until October for their first win, having played five of their first six league games away from the Coventry Building Society Arena due to the state of its pitch, which had hosted the rugby sevens at the 2022 Commonwealth Games.

Gyokeres' output is lethal but varied. Once a winger, now converted into a line-leading centre-forward, he is vibrant, skilful and able to create chances for himself. He has scored every kind of goal this term, from countless touch-and-hit finishes to a solo dribble from inside his own half against Wigan, or the poacher's deflection in beating his marker to the front post for his 15th league strike of the season, against Sunderland in February.

Now those headline-grabbing displays are rumoured to have many more clubs than just Coventry willing to show Gyokeres the love...

Congratulations, Viktor: you've been voted *FFT's* No.1 player in the Football League – how does that feel?
It's brilliant that people feel that way about me. There are loads of really good players in the league. I work hard and my team help me a lot, so it's good to hear that it's being noticed. It's been a strong season so far and I hope we can make it even better.

Coventry had a slow start. What changed?
It was tough, playing away in five of our first six league matches, with three home games postponed. But when we began to play more regularly, things started to go better for all of us and we won more games, which obviously helped me individually to score and do well, too. Since October, it's been great. Personally I've been playing lots, and the more you play, the more you get used to your team-mates and trying different things on the pitch. I'm doing better and better and I want to keep improving this season.

The Sky Blues had played themselves into play-off contention by March, so is a first Premier League campaign since 2000-01 a real possibility?
I think so, if we keep doing what we're doing. We're an attacking side and we score a few goals, so we have a really good chance. We have a good team; when we play the sides around us, we feel we can be up there. It's not something I think about much, though. We just focus on trying to win the games, not what other people are speaking about.

You had nearly beaten last year's 18-goal tally by March. Do you set yourself targets?
It's not really a target, but I look at what I've done previously and try to improve, so I'm trying to beat that and see how far I can go from there. I focus match by match and on scoring in the next game.

You're second in the Championship Golden Boot race, so that must be on your radar...
Naturally I aim to score as many goals as possible and I think I'm currently a few goals behind [Chuba Akpom], although it's great to be chasing somebody because it's a good target. It helps us to get nearer the play-offs as well, so it's a win-win situation. Perhaps people expect me to score more now than they did previously, but that's a good thing – it's nice to feel that pressure to score every game. You have to think you'll always score.

Your boss Mark Robins was a pretty good striker himself. Does he give you advice?
He gives me pointers about what I could do better and what will help me in matches. I try to take that on board and add it to my game. He's talked to me a lot about my movement in the penalty area and when I try to run in behind – how I should be positioning myself.

You didn't play a league game for Brighton following your move there in 2018, and had some tricky spells out on loan, so why have things clicked for you at Coventry?
Moving here permanently in the summer of 2021 helped me because it meant that I was a Coventry player and didn't have to think about anything else. On loan, you think about going back [to Brighton], so maybe I just feel more relaxed. It was important to sign here permanently rather than on loan.

Why didn't things work out at Brighton?
I was there for a few seasons and played for the first team in a handful of cup games, but then I was loaned out for two years. I didn't really get a decent opportunity, but it's up to me too and maybe I didn't deserve it. I don't know – things just didn't happen. For me, it's important to play and I played when I came to Coventry, so I think that's why I developed here. Of course I wanted that game time in the Premier League, but it is what it is and I can't do anything about it now. It's nothing I regret; I wanted to get the opportunity and it didn't happen.

You made your Sweden debut in 2019 and now have 11 caps. What's it like to play with Zlatan Ibrahimovic?
It was great to get that first call-up, although it would have been even better if Zlatan had been there as well [Ibrahimovic retired from Sweden internationals in 2016, reversing that decision in 2021], but he was there in the November international break so I met him then. It was special to be in the same team as him. There wasn't much time for him to give me advice because you don't train that often with the national team, as everyone is arriving from their clubs and you're trying to recover between games, but it was good to at least be in the camp with him for a week.

Gyokeres is a Hungarian name. Did you also have the option to play for the Magyars?
My grandfather is from Hungary so I think I could have played for them, but I haven't checked. I've been living in Sweden my whole life and I'm from there, so there wasn't really any choice for me.

Your displays have reportedly been earning a lot of attention from Premier League outfits, including Everton and Leeds. How does that feel?
You think about it sometimes because obviously you want to play at as high a level as possible and in the best league, but my focus is here. I know Coventry still want me, so it wasn't something I had to stress about – I just focused on being here. It's good to be in the conversation regarding Premier League teams, but right now we're in the middle of the season, we have several matches left and hopefully we can get into the play-offs and reach the Premier League with Coventry. We will see where we are once the season's over and take it from there.

Do you feel ready to make the step up?
I'm doing well in the Championship, though of course you want to try it in the future. We will see when that is. I have goals for myself that I want to achieve in my career and I'll see where I am at the end of the campaign, so it depends.

"PEOPLE EXPECT ME TO SCORE MORE NOW THAN THEY DID PREVIOUSLY. THAT'S A GOOD THING"

ROMA
digitalbits

"MY FOCUS WAS ON JOINING ARSENAL, THEN JOSE CALLED – IT WAS JUST A NO-BRAINER"

Tammy Abraham has loved life under Mourinho since moving to Roma in 2021, and while the striker is in no hurry to leave Serie A – or pesto – behind, he's not ruling out a Chelsea return...

Words Alasdair Mackenzie

Tammy Abraham beams with health and happiness as the leonine forward strides gracefully into a small meeting room at Roma's training ground. Life is good.

This isn't, admittedly, the usual effect that *FourFourTwo* has on people – the marksman became a father for the first time a few days before we meet. "I don't think the feeling has kicked in yet," he grins proudly. Baby Amari's arrival brought even more joy into a life that has looked rosy ever since the 25-year-old decided to – as Jose Mourinho put it – swap the rain of London for the sunshine of Rome in the summer of 2021.

Adapting to a new team in a new league presented few complications as Abraham ▸

plundered 27 goals in all competitions in his first season with the Giallorossi, the most by a Roma debutant since Rodolfo Volk in 1930. Crucially, it's not just time on the pitch he's enjoying. The food, history and language of his new home are as much a part of the Englishman's maiden overseas adventure. "Pesto is my favourite dish - it's not Roman, but I could eat that every day," he reveals. "I never had it before in England, so coming here was the first time."

For a man who professes he "used to love history at school", Abraham finds himself in a pretty good place. "Seeing the Colosseum in person was an amazing feeling," he says.

As for the language, the Londoner has risen to the challenge with enthusiasm, motivated perhaps by the efforts of friend Fikayo Tomori up north in Milan. His ex-Chelsea team-mate impressed when stepping up for post-match interviews in Italian, something Tammy has also been brave enough to have a crack at. "When I first arrived, everyone was speaking English with me, but as time has gone on people are starting to speak more Italian," he explains. "I'm picking up a few words – for anything I don't know, I'll ask what it means. I can get around, understanding some of the language and trying to speak it."

It's a new life, a new world. In less than two seasons, Abraham has gone from the frustrated fringes of the Chelsea squad to a star of a Roma side that's electrified one of Italy's most passionate fanbases and ended a 14-year trophy drought in last campaign's Europa Conference League. The No.9 was the Giallorossi's top scorer in the competition.

It all could have panned out so differently, had Jose Mourinho not picked up the phone to make a decisive intervention.

"It was time to move on from Chelsea, and I was talking to various clubs in England and Europe," recalls Abraham. "My focus was on a certain London club. I didn't have to move anywhere, I was familiar with the area... it was Arsenal. My dad is a massive Arsenal fan, so he was very keen on it, and everything was going well.

"Then Jose called. I never usually answer numbers I don't have saved in my contacts. But he said, 'Hi Tammy, it's Jose'. I was like, 'Wow, that's a surprise!' He asked how the family was. I was familiar with him because he knew me as a kid at Chelsea. He asked me, 'Are you ready to leave the bad weather behind and come to sunny Rome?' I laughed, we spoke a bit more, he told me about the project, his ambitions for the team. He'd only been at the club a short time, but explained what he'd seen and what it was like.

"I spoke to my agents and they said it was a no-brainer, the perfect time to start a new life, to go abroad and learn about a different culture. I was so ready for it, and I haven't looked back since."

Luckily for Abraham, he had people to lean on for good advice, picking the brains of Italy international Jorginho and ex-Roma defender Antonio Rudiger. "They were telling me it's a great club, with a wonderful stadium and fans," he says. "I used to watch Roma in the Champions League and kind of had an idea, but coming over here was a crazy experience. Even just arriving at the airport, supporters were waiting for me. I flew private, so didn't know what time I was landing. The fans must have been there from the morning. To have that welcome was mad."

Abraham could also depend on his old pal Tomori, whose move to Milan had just been made permanent after an impressive half-season loan. "Tomori is one of my best pals," says the striker. "He gave me a ring and said he'd heard I was coming to Italy. He told me the fans are passionate, they love football here. I was ready. I didn't try to over-think it too much – if you do that, you start to panic. I just said, 'This is the right time, I'm at the right age, I'm ready to experience football in the world and I don't look back'. I've loved every moment so far."

Above "This is why I want you to score more from corners..." **Top** There are worse places to party following European glory

> "JOSE SAID, 'ARE YOU READY TO LEAVE THE BAD WEATHER AND COME TO SUNNY ROME?'"

MOURINHO'S MIND GAMES

The Mourinho factor clearly paid a big part. The Special One made Abraham the marquee signing of his opening transfer window in the Italian capital at a reported £34 million, and their relationship has blossomed since.

"Jose is a legend," enthuses Abraham. "If I wanted to be a manager after football, I'd want to be like him. It's just his persona, his energy. I love it. He's what we call a real boss. He's a leader. When he speaks, you listen. He knows his man management, he's one of the best in the world at that. He knows how to drive you, how to really get under your skin. Even if you're doing amazing, he'll still try to make you do more. He's never satisfied, he always wants the best for you."

Players have waxed lyrical about Mourinho's motivational methods for years, so *FFT* is keen to know specifics.

"Before the semi-final of the Conference League against Leicester, we played a league match and I thought I was having a brilliant game!" he smiles. "I was full of confidence. The following day, Jose called me into the meeting room. We had Leicester in about two days, no time to recover. He said, 'Tam, I don't think you've been good enough'. In my head I was like, 'I've just played pretty well!'. He said, 'I think you can do more'. No problem. When he speaks, I always listen and take his advice. I'm a big guy, I'm strong – he told me he didn't think I scored enough with my head, especially from corners.

"What was crazy was that two days later against Leicester, I scored a header from a corner! I remember trying to work out how he managed to get me to do this. It was so crazy. He spoke about it two days ago, and now I'm scoring with my head."

As resounding a success as that debut season was, a dip in form in the first half of 2022-23 ultimately cost Abraham his dream of making an England World Cup squad. Had the tournament stuck to its regular summer calendar, he would have been hard to ignore, but a return of just four goals in 20 games by the winter break left him in little doubt of the news he was about to receive when Gareth Southgate's name flashed up on his phone.

"He gave me a call the day before the group was announced," says Abraham. "He said I'd hit the wrong form at the wrong time; that it would be unfair not to take the players he's taking because they've been performing well. It was just about me getting back to where I was and trying to be in the next squad.

"I kind of knew in the back of my head already. I wasn't at a stage where I was full of confidence or banging in goals, so I was sort of expecting it, but it's obviously not nice to hear those things."

Abraham took the chance to soak up some sunshine during the winter break and watch the Three Lions' efforts from afar, and after returning he rediscovered some form. Taking time out also allowed him to reflect on what was behind the dip. He highlights changes in the Roma line-up, particularly the departure of "huge player" Henrikh Mkhitaryan to Inter, plus his own mentality.

"I was still getting used to the changes, and at first it was me not focusing on myself," he continues. "If something went wrong, I was the first to blame others instead of sitting back and thinking what I needed to improve to help someone else, or my own reactions. Sometimes if you spot a player like me with my head down, no confidence, it affects the team's confidence as well. I had to snap out ▶

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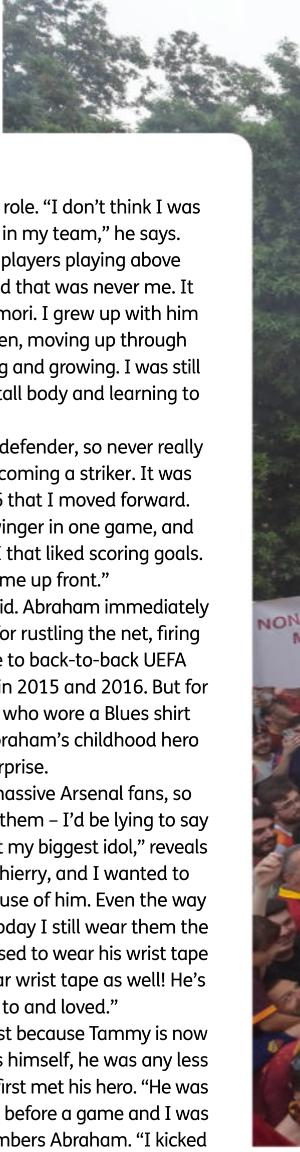


of it and say, 'I'm a big player, my team need to see me happy, encouraging and confident', so the vibe passes throughout the side. Once I'd realised that, I was quickly back to playing my football again."

Abraham scored as many Serie A goals – three – in his first six games back as he had in 15 before the World Cup, while setting up another two as his partnership with summer arrival Paulo Dybala started to gel. "Every day we're training with each other, having laughs with each other, and it's paying off in games," says the frontman.

Abraham wasn't the only Englishman who missed out on Southgate's World Cup squad while playing in Serie A. Regular game time alongside Abraham at Roma wasn't enough to push Chris Smalling into contention, and Tomori was also overlooked despite playing a central role in Milan's scudetto last season.

Is it harder to break into the England team while away from the Premier League gaze? "I would say so – I think that's just normal in life," says Abraham. "The Premier League is a league that English people are so familiar with, as it's live on TV. Serie A matches aren't shown as much. I don't remember watching a lot of Serie A when I was living in England. It's difficult. You have to keep doing well, get people to talk about you more, then maybe you've got a chance."

TITI'S WRISTY BUSINESS

A footballer's career can be a winding road that lurches off into unexpected directions. In Abraham's case, that's certainly true.

In the space of seven years, he's played for five clubs, had offers from several others and had to decide between two national teams, after turning down Nigeria as a teenager.

Looking even further back to his formative days coming through the Chelsea academy, Abraham's path could have taken a different route entirely, had his coaches not had the foresight to alter his role. "I don't think I was ever the best player in my team," he says. "There were always players playing above their age groups, and that was never me. It was just me and Tomori. I grew up with him since the age of seven, moving up through the ranks, developing and growing. I was still getting used to my tall body and learning to control my feet.

"I started off as a defender, so never really imagined myself becoming a striker. It was when I was 15 or 16 that I moved forward. I was playing as a winger in one game, and they started to see I that liked scoring goals. Eventually they put me up front."

Just as well they did. Abraham immediately developed a knack for rustling the net, firing Chelsea's youth side to back-to-back UEFA Youth League titles in 2015 and 2016. But for a south London boy who wore a Blues shirt from very young, Abraham's childhood hero might come as a surprise.

"My family were massive Arsenal fans, so I grew up watching them – I'd be lying to say Thierry Henry wasn't my biggest idol," reveals Abraham. "I loved Thierry, and I wanted to be a footballer because of him. Even the way he wore his socks, today I still wear them the same. The way he used to wear his wrist tape – if you notice, I wear wrist tape as well! He's a player I looked up to and loved."

Don't think that just because Tammy is now a role model for kids himself, he was any less starstruck when he first met his hero. "He was doing some TV work before a game and I was warming up," remembers Abraham. "I kicked the ball near him on purpose and went over – he gave me a hug. I don't think I've washed that top since, I've kept it. It was a dream!"

Although Abraham was a prodigious talent at youth level, he had to earn his stripes at Chelsea, like many Stamford Bridge starlets, over a series of loan spells. The forward was sent to three clubs in three years between 2016 and 2019, before eventually forcing his

> "I WENT OVER TO HENRY AND HE GAVE ME A HUG. I HAVEN'T WASHED THAT SHIRT SINCE!"

ITALIAN JOBS

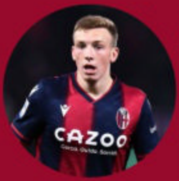
Tammy Abraham, Fikayo Tomori and Chris Smalling are three of 10 Brits currently in Serie A, some enjoying *la dolce vita* more than others

ETHAN AMPADU

The Welsh stopper joined Venezia on loan from Chelsea in 2021-22, but was unable to prevent an instant return to the second tier. Back in Serie A this term, at Spezia, he's again fighting relegation.

JOSH DOIG

The 20-year-old Scot left Hibernian for Hellas Verona last summer – by March he'd scored twice and provided four assists from left-wing-back as the Gialloblu battle to beat the drop.

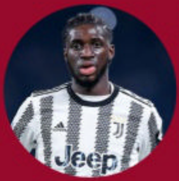


LEWIS FERGUSON

When Aaron Hickey exited Bologna last July, the Rossoblu needed just three days to lure another Scot – Aberdeen talent Ferguson. The midfielder scooped Serie A goal of the month in November.

LIAM HENDERSON

The former Celtic youngster initially moved to Italy in 2018, joining Bari in Serie B. He steered Hellas Verona into the top tier a year later, and is now at Empoli following a spell with Lecce.



SAMUEL ILING-JUNIOR

The Islington-born England U20 winger swapped Chelsea for Juventus in 2020 at 16. He's come off the bench several times this season, helping to set up two goals against Benfica in the Champions League.

RONALDO VIEIRA

Once a favourite at Leeds, the former England U21 man teamed up with Sampdoria in 2018. After a miserable first half of 2022-23, the midfielder was dispatched to Torino on loan in January.

HARRY WINKS

Vieira isn't the only midfielder with Three Lions links to suffer at Samp this season. Winks, who arrived on loan from Spurs last summer, eventually resumed action in January after an ankle injury.

MI STANCO
MAI DI TE

digitalbits

Clockwise from above Abraham has won Roman hearts; Dybala is his new partner in crime; mixed emotions with Chelsea; life on loan at Swansea was a challenge; "Give me some pestoooooooo!"

way into the plans of new boss, and Blues legend, Frank Lampard at his parent club.

"I wouldn't say it was frustrating – I took each one as a challenge, a learning curve," he insists. "It was Championship, Premier League, Championship, so it was a change. But it was a superb experience.

"I had my first loan at Bristol City where I went into men's football. I didn't know the Championship was that difficult. It was game after game after game, but a great learning curve for me. It turned me into a man.

"Then Swansea was my first experience in the Premier League. It was difficult, I learned the other side of football. I'd grown up in the Chelsea academy where we had the ball all the time. At Swansea, we never had the ball. It was tough, I had to understand that side.

"Then there was the amazing season with Aston Villa, getting promoted, which is one of the best feelings in football."

When the news dropped that Abraham's opportunity had finally come with Chelsea, it came as a surprise to the striker. "I never knew I was going to stay," he admits. "I was speaking to Villa at the time, and they told me, 'After this loan, we're going to come and buy you in the summer'. In my head, I was thinking this is the year I move on and go back to Villa. But I remember in pre-season, Frank came up to me and asked if I wanted the No.9 shirt. I was like, 'Wow, that's a shock!' I thought I was going out on loan, then that question popped up, so I had the belief that it might be my year to stay at Chelsea."

Abraham took his opportunity, notching 15 Premier League goals to finish the season as Chelsea's top scorer, but the London giant's decision to replace Lampard with Thomas Tuchel midway through the following term ultimately spelled the end.

Although the striker finished 2020-21 with a Champions League winner's medal and as the club's joint top scorer in all competitions, his time under Tuchel's stewardship proved frustrating. Abraham struggled to force his way back into the team after injury, and by the business end of the campaign he wasn't even making the bench for the Champions League or FA Cup finals.

"I think I was a little bit unlucky with that situation," he laments. "When Tuchel came in I played the first few games, then I picked up a serious ankle injury. It was one of those annoying injuries that wasn't healing.

"At the time I was injured, the team was doing well, winning games. It's always hard for a player who's injured to come back into a side that's winning regularly. I did get fit again thankfully, but I was sat on the bench, coming on for a few minutes here and there.

I never regained that position after the injuries. I started to realise towards the end that maybe it was time to go. I didn't play as many minutes as I'd liked and wasn't able to express myself as I wanted to. I knew it was time."

Fast-forward nearly a couple of years and speculation about Abraham's future is again rampant. With Chelsea reportedly considering activating a buy-back clause and Manchester United also sniffing around for a new No.9, talk of a summer Premier League return has been incessant in recent months.

Leaning back in his chair with a warm smile flashing frequently across his face, Abraham doesn't look like a man who is quick to anger, but does he find the rumour mill irritating?

"It's never annoying – as a player, to hear that teams want you is always motivating," he says. "It means that you're clearly doing something right and you have interest around the world. You use that as motivation, instead of finding it annoying. It's nice to know that teams are interested in me."

Reuniting with an old flame seldom brings success in this sport, but Abraham won't rule anything out when quizzed on the prospect of another Stamford Bridge stint.

"Would I go back there? In football you can never say never," he states. "Right now, my focus is here at Roma - we want to finish the season strongly. I haven't started thinking about anything yet, apart from being here and doing my best.

"I wouldn't say there's unfinished business in England – I'm in no rush. Football has no location, it could be anywhere. Maybe I stay at Roma for the next decade, maybe I don't. You never know what's around the corner."

For now, then, Tammy Abraham's future is all about pesto and parenthood.

A.F.C. RICHMOND

TED TALK

Love it or loathe it, seen it or saved it, we need to talk about *Ted Lasso*. The award-winning show kicks off a third – and likely final – season having captivated TV audiences in both the UK and US, even if you could fill two internets with what Ted doesn't know about football...

Words Si Hawkins
Additional reporting Stuart Higgins

There's an episode near the end of *Ted Lasso*'s second season – no big spoilers; it's an odd standalone one – where Coach Beard, Ted's assistant at fictional club AFC Richmond, goes on a mighty post-defeat bender, gatecrashes a private club, gets chased by a jealous lover, fights one of his players' parents and throws shapes to electro-house banger *Hello* by Martin Solveig (featuring Dragonette) while hallucinating about Thierry Henry. Top fun, although you can't imagine that happening to Ray Lewington or Pat Rice.

Lasso is not an entirely faithful portrayal of life in the upper echelons of English football, then – but it's working, gosh-darn it. This unlikely sitcom about a US college football coach (played by Jason Sudeikis) managing an English soccer team has just begun its eagerly-awaited third season and it already boasts a Manchester City-sized trophy cabinet. The first series broke records for Emmy Award nominations, and the lure of *Lasso* has only grown. There's shortbread cookie-flavoured Lasso ice cream (a moreish treat he bakes for his boss in one episode), a moustachioed Ted Build-a-Bear, and even a whole AFC Richmond club shop.

Actually, City pop up regularly in the show – they loan Richmond a player, though he's a git – and plenty of real football figures make cameo appearances. For season three, producers signed a six-figure deal with the Premier League, to use footage, kits, logos... maybe the trophy. Ted Lasso gets real? Well, previous seasons have rubbed football connoisseurs up the wrong way, which isn't something *Friends* ever had to cope with.

English football is globally massive, yet it's bizarre that a show about a bang-average London club would become America's most talked-about sitcom. Strong characters are the secret, and there are interesting stories behind the scenes, too. Cristo Fernandez was a promising young footballer in Mexico before finding belated fame as loveable Richmond striker Dani Rojas – not that he courts it.

"It happened at a shopping mall in Los Angeles," says Fernandez, on a break from filming in London. "I was in the loo when I could feel this person just staring at me as I was taking a wee. It was very unnerving.

"Eventually he said, 'Are you that smiley one from *Ted Lasso*?' He didn't even know my name – not Cristo, nor Dani. He asked for a selfie right there on the spot as I was having a wee. I said, 'Can you just hang on a minute until I've finished?' and he took the selfie right there in the loo. That was one of my stranger encounters..."

Rojas sports a euphoric catchphrase – "Football is life!" – but it's Ted's pearls of wisdom that launched the show, back in the bleak days of 2020. Lasso is a walking motivational-quote machine, as if someone tried to clone Bill Shankly but wound up nearer Ned Flanders instead. His most iconic message: the handwritten 'Believe', stuck above Richmond's changing-room door in episode one. It was dramatically ripped off in the season two finale... but by whom?

Jesse Marsch, perhaps? Now that would be a twist. It's hard to judge exactly how much life at Elland Road might have been tainted by Ted's success, but it loomed throughout.

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'Jesse Marsch was mocked as Ted Lasso and never stood a chance of winning over Leeds fans,' led one tabloid, following the American manager's recent sacking. Marsch admitted to being a big Sudeikis fan, oddly enough, but the show has been a slower burn in the UK – which was awkward for the cast, filming in south-west London.

"During series one and two, people weren't sure who we were," admits series co-creator Brendan Hunt, who plays the aforementioned Coach Beard. "We got the impression that the British hadn't taken to it."

Like Lasso himself, these Americans were entering unknown territory, but Hunt is a secret weapon, on screen and off it. While the brilliantly deadpan Beard steals scenes, Brendan is the on-set football enthusiast, itching to get things right. So, how did this Chicagoan end up being a massive Gooner?

"I'd been working over in Amsterdam and became a huge fan of Dennis Bergkamp," explains Hunt. Nick Hornby's Arsenal-focused *Fever Pitch* followed, naturally. And then, as Hunt recalls now, "I saw [Nwankwo] Kanu's brilliant hat-trick against Chelsea at Stamford Bridge in 1999, including that amazing third goal, and that was it."

Hunt was particularly thrilled to discover Lasso-loving quotes from Gary Lineker and Jurgen Klopp, early doors, after a "bit of reticence came from certain members of the English soccer media".

Those on-field set-pieces could be clunky, however. Even some cast members were dubious. Actor, screenwriter and Wolves fan Tom Parry played an AFC Richmond fan in the season one finale and wasn't sure what he'd signed up for.

"I turned up at Selhurst Park and they put me in, effectively, a Crystal Palace fan's gear," says Parry. "I took pictures of myself and said to my mate, 'This is going to be dodgy, this show'." Wolves and Palace had some beef years ago, but Parry did the business. He continues, "I went home and thought, 'Well, that's going to be weird and ropey'. And then I found out that Brett Goldstein's writing on it, and he's in it, and he's got a great track record. 'Oh, OK...' And then it became a global phenomenon."

Goldstein plays the rugged Richmond captain Roy Kent, Ted Lasso's breakout sensation who makes Malcolm Tucker from *The Thick of It* sound like Paddington Bear. Kent's apoplectic f-bombs are "like all the nipples in that movie, *Showgirls*," muses Ted. "Halfway through, you don't even notice; you just kinda get sucked into the narrative."

Thankfully, the show is on a streaming channel and so locker-room language is allowed, though *Lasso* did kick off on a major US network. Sudeikis hit it big with 2011 film *Horrible Bosses* – ironic, given the affable boss he'd later portray – and NBC touched base after securing Premier League broadcasting rights in 2013. "They wanted to do a promo that'd endear English football to American football fans," Sudeikis told *FFT* back in 2020. ▸

> LASSO IS LIKE SOMEONE TRIED TO CLONE BILL SHANKLY BUT WOUND UP WITH NED FLANDERS

Below Ted Lasso, Coach Beard, Nate the Great and Roy Kent are all back for more tales of the bang-average football club from south-west London

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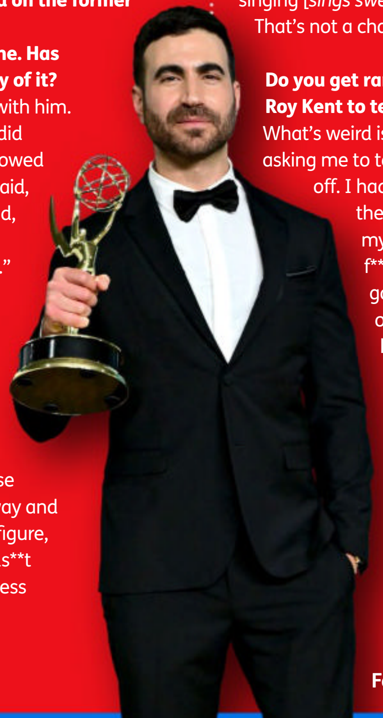
THE WRATH OF KENT

***Ted Lasso*'s breakout star is the furiously foul-mouthed captain/coach Roy Kent, played by Sutton-born writer/actor Brett Goldstein. He's a more considerate soul. Or is he...?**

Were people surprised when you got the part of an aggressive footballer?
I think everyone was. I put myself on tape for it secretly and didn't tell anyone in the writers' room, because I knew that no one was thinking of me for it. But I knew inside me was a deep volcano of rage that I'd been suppressing for all of these years.

Kent is partly based on the former Manchester United hard man, Roy Keane. Has Keano watched any of it?
I've not had a chat with him. I believe Sky Sports did a clip where they showed him some of it and said, "Is that you?" He said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

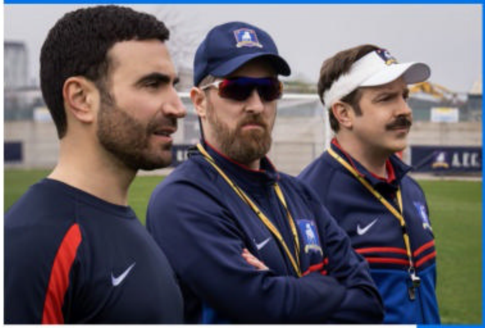
Why do you reckon Kent became such a phenomenon?
I think that maybe everyone's a bit Roy Kent. He's complicated, because he gets in his own way and he's sort of a tragic figure, but he also calls bulls**t on most things. I guess that's the thing.



***Ted Lasso* might take some liberties with the football scenes, but it has absolutely nailed the swearing...**
That was very important – something we talked a lot about in the writers' room. From day one I was like, "Look, in England, and in football, there's going to be f**king s**t-tons of swearing. It's very important. We can take a couple of liberties, but you can't pretend the fans are going to be singing [*sings sweetly*] 'Go-on, every-one!' That's not a chant."

Do you get random strangers asking Roy Kent to tell them to fk off?**
What's weird is I get more people asking me to tell their auntie to f**k off. I had that in a supermarket the other day: "Can you call my auntie and tell her to f**k off?" I was like, "I'm going to need more info on your auntie. I don't know what she's done; I don't know if she deserves this. I'm going to need a whole bio on this woman before I complete this task."

To wrap up, then, can Roy tell *FourFourTwo* to fk off?**
F**K OFF. Cheers!



WE ARE RICHMON

"So, we came up with this character, did a commercial, and people really responded."

In those promo sketches, Ted takes the Tottenham job, goofing around while Gareth Bale, Kyle Walker & Co try to train (it was that long ago). Liverpool were one of several clubs who declined, as disclosed by NBC host Rebecca Lowe on *Lasso* podcast *Richmond 'Til We Die*. That version of Lasso was a bit of a douchebag, calling players 'women' and urging fans to follow refs home. Sitcom Ted is all southern hospitality, with a trademark 'I appreciate you' even for the haters.

If it seems far-fetched for a Premier League outfit to appoint a budding NFL coach, all becomes clear by the end of episode one. Club owner Rebecca Welton, played by *Game of Thrones*' Hannah Waddingham, has an ulterior motive: revenge. Ted and the media aren't aware, and an ugly press conference feels not unlike the reception that American coaches receive in the UK.

"Trent Crimm was there to totally lacerate Ted Lasso," explains sitcom veteran James Lance, who plays Lasso's early journalistic nemesis. "It was like Coco the Clown had come in from America to manage this team – a team that really means something to the fans and the game."

Crimm is also unrealistic (a well-dressed football writer, really?) but he's one of many seemingly minor characters who later reveal hidden layers. Soon enough, Lasso's lofty ideals "blow the doors off of Trent's heart," says Lance, although he stays tight-lipped about Crimm and Ted's further adventures.

Ted may have a loose grasp of offside ("I literally have a better understanding of who killed Kennedy") and footballers ("You got Ronaldo and the fellow who bends it like himself") but the show's main thrust is seeing who else gets on board. We could all learn lessons from Lasso.

Planning some exercise? "Your body is like day-old rice," says Ted. "If it ain't warmed up properly, something real bad could happen." Very wise words. Coping with cock-ups? "You know what the happiest animal on Earth is?" he asks struggling rookie Sam Obisanya, played by Toheeb Jimoh. "It's a goldfish. You know why? It's got a 10-second memory. Be a goldfish."

Useful advice – and the timing of Lasso's arrival was also handy. There's a theory that *Ted Lasso* proved so popular in the States because, with Donald Trump in the White House, people wanted to root for someone decent. "And crucially, it came out right in the middle of the first COVID lockdown," says comedian, actor and fictional AFC Richmond supporter Tom Parry, who ignored his early hesitations ("I almost forgot that I was in it") and lapped up the first season while stuck indoors. Ted was just what many folks really needed at that time.

"Here's this positive, generous-hearted character, bringing people together – and at a time when football was being played in front of empty stadiums," ponders Parry. "I do think that it's [down to] the quality of the product itself, but there was something serendipitous about a programme coming along that was so warm-spirited, and also about a game we all loved, that we suddenly felt like we were being deprived of."

Football shows aren't easy to get right. Parry currently writes for *Fantasy Football League*, a reboot that worked by recreating the original formula. Previous comedic ideas never left the bench.

"I've tried to pitch football things, and the line has always been 'fictional football doesn't work on telly'," he says. "The story of *Ted Lasso* is like a plot from *Ted Lasso* – like a sports film in itself – in having happened the way it has."

The knock-on effects are also feel-good. Cristo Fernandez actually coined his character's 'football is life!' catchphrase during his audition, and it helped that he meant it. "Football really was my life," he recalls of his childhood. "My mother said that I read, watched and breathed football all of the time – I knew nothing else. But then injury struck. I played in the second division and was training with the first team when I suffered a knee injury which stopped me from progressing.

"So then I studied communications in Mexico and discovered my passion for acting and film-making. I know many friends who had promising football careers that were cruelly cut short by injury and they have struggled afterwards."

His character endures anguish in season two, however, and the whole tone grows deeper and

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e Royal East
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Managers' Offices
Away Team Facilities
Pitch Access
WEST HAM UNITED
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CRUDE YET TENDER, THE SHOW ENCOURAGES US TO BE BETTER VERSIONS OF OURSELVES

Clockwise from above Kitman to coach?; press conferences are a window for more homespun wisdom; Juno Temple plays an influencer; Kent, Beard and Lasso share one beard between them; Lasso's methods are straight out of the NFL; the very odd couple

darker. A club psychologist joins Richmond and daddy issues crop up, particularly for Ted and talented tosspot Jamie Tartt, the Manchester City loanee (played by Phil Dunster). Tartt is also in a love triangle with club influencer Keeley Jones (Juno Temple) and the slowly thawing Roy Kent, in one of several romantic subplots.

With *Lasso* and the well-crafted real-life soap operatics of *Welcome to Wrexham*, a great deal of football agnostics are now becoming unwittingly acclimatised to life under British floodlights. The aforementioned podcast *Richmond Til We Die* is one of several creations dedicated to *Lasso*, and while the three hosts are more football-savvy than most, they also highlight cultural references weaved into the series (Coach Beard's solo escapade is an homage to Martin Scorsese's 1985 film, *After Hours*). Co-host Brett Callan tells *FFT*, "Personally, I really love the way the show uses music." A Crystal Palace episode closes with Palace anthem *Glad All Over*, for example – an Easter egg for football anoraks.

"The overall message of *Lasso* appealed to us initially as well," explains Callan. "While being hilarious and heartfelt and crude and tender, it encourages us to become better versions of ourselves."

Take how the scary, hairy Kent evolves. "He has this hard exterior, with all of his grunts and curse words," continues Callan, "but on the inside, he's just gooey caramel. I think most of us can either relate to Roy on some level, or know someone who is a Roy."

The show's locations have become popular pilgrimage spots ("A trip to west London would be fabulous," says Callan). Pub scenes are recorded at real Richmond boozers The Prince's Head and The Cricketers, while the football parts are captured at non-league Hayes & Yeading, with Selhurst Park doubling as AFC's Nelson Road. Similar colours, after all. Interestingly, part of that deal involved Crystal Palace beating Richmond in the opening game, perhaps so viewers wouldn't confuse Palace with the comedy club. Lasso's team was originally set to play in Greenwich – presumably not at the O2 – only for them to prioritise, says Sudeikis, "somewhere that had the best pubs for post-shoot beers".

For the new season, former Swindon and DC United defender Kasali Casal clambered aboard to enhance the on-field sequences, though he was underwhelmed when *Lasso*'s assistant director called. "I told her I'd never heard of it," confesses Casal. "She said it was a football show and they wanted to make the football scenes clearer, slicker and just generally more authentic. I told her, 'I'm not an actor' and asked if I would have any lines, because that would've been a deal-breaker."

Just the touchlines, thankfully. Pretend football scenes can look painfully ponderous, so Casal, 35, went full drill sergeant. "We had six football blocks and each block was a full week of filming – the actors and supporting artists were required from 7am until 6pm," he says. "It was hard work."

Some were decent already. Dunster, the real-life Jamie Tartt, is particularly handy despite more of a rugby background, while Fernandez, in his words, does "all of my own stunts and tricks because I feel that I have a duty to honour my professional past". He adds, "Out of all the players, only Brett, who plays Roy Kent, needs a little bit of help!"

He's doing all right. Goldstein has probably benefited most from the Ted Effect, winning consecutive Emmys ("I was flabbergasted when I heard him using his regular voice," says Callan), appearing in the Marvel and DC universes and co-creating another Apple show, *Shrinking*. Meanwhile, Waddingham, who sings in several episodes, is hosting Eurovision, and Nick Mohammed looks set to be season three's main protagonist. He plays Nate the Great, a kitman that Lasso promotes to coach. Again, there are parallels with Sudeikis' offscreen management.

"There's no such thing as a bad idea," says Cristo Fernandez. "There are people who started out as runners who are now assistant directors, people in catering now in the art department, and people who helped out as extras now fully-fledged actors."

Perhaps we could all try to be more Ted. Which makes you wonder: could Lasso's feel-good methods actually work? Say, if he managed Wolves...? "Not a chance," says Tom Parry. Modern pros may seem nice, but... well... "You see the behind-the-scenes things and you realise it's a f**king bearpit; a world full of alpha males."

Best stick to the sitcom, then, though that may conclude soon. Like the club careers of Antonio Conte and Jose Mourinho, Lasso was never really looking beyond season three.

"I personally think that this will be the last one," admits Fernandez. "But there may be scope for some kind of spin-off or a movie. It will be strange without *Ted Lasso* in my life."

That weekly dose of positivity is a rare ray of sunshine these days. But how would any follow-up work? "One theory I have found compelling," says *RTWD*'s Brent Callan, "is for Rebecca to purchase an NFL team, either in the States or in London, and for her to name Ted the head coach." That sounds plausible. Heck, that might even get us watching the shoulder-padded egg-chasers.

Ted Lasso, we appreciate you! ●

MESTALLA MISERY

Valencia won two Ligas, the UEFA Cup and reached two Champions League finals at the turn of the century, but a half-built stadium, Gary Neville in the dugout and Peter Lim's toxic ownership threaten Los Che's very existence

Words Marcus Alves

LIM GO HOME
VCF
HERRERO

Back in late February, Fabio Aurelio returned to former club Valencia for several days, to check on one of his clients. Now an agent, the former left-back won two La Liga titles and the 2003-04 UEFA Cup with the Spanish giants, before rejoining manager Rafa Benitez at Liverpool two years after that continental success.

Going back to the city where his greatest triumphs occured, the Brazilian couldn't help but feel a bit melancholic every time he looked through his hotel room window at the modern Avenida de las Cortes Valencianas.

"It's kind of sad, you know?" Aurelio tells *FourFourTwo* a few weeks later. "You draw back the curtains and there it is, right in front of you, that big monument, static, nothing much happening around it, no real life. You look from the outside and think that the stadium is finished, but no. No one can really say if that day will ever come.

"So, damn, it's sad because you've lived there and know that city. The club and the supporters deserve a stadium like that."

With a planned capacity of up to 80,000, Nou Mestalla was destined to take Valencia into a new era when construction began in 2007. Instead, work was paused within two years due to a lack of funds, turning a half-built arena into a white elephant that epitomises the club's myriad problems. Having previously aimed to re-establish themselves at the top of European football, Los Che are now at real risk of ►

La Liga relegation for the first time since 1986. It wasn't supposed to be like this...

THE HITMAN AND HIM

In the early 2000s, Valencia claimed two league crowns under Benitez, pipping Real Madrid and Barcelona teams containing Zinedine Zidane (2001-02) and Ronaldinho (2003-04). Los Che also won the 2004 UEFA Cup Final under Benitez to be named the world's best team, in rankings published by the International Federation of Football History. Hector Cuper had previously led them to consecutive Champions League finals in 2000 and 2001. They feared no one.

"We're going to be the envy of Madrid and Barcelona," promised club president Juan Soler during a dinner with journalists in late 2004, at which he announced, among other things, that they would build a new home.

Soler wasn't kidding, having asked UEFA what it would take for a stadium to be rated five stars. The original idea was for it to be "as luxurious as possible" and host the 2011 Champions League Final. Two years before that though, Spain's financial crisis hit and construction work came to a halt. Valencia were left with one-and-a-half grounds, their pre-existing Mestalla still standing.

It's the oldest stadium in La Liga, built in 1923, surviving wars, several renovations and the 1982 World Cup. This year, special shirts have celebrated its centenary, but there has been very little to celebrate lately.

According to supporters, that's likely to continue until they can find a way to force Singaporean billionaire Peter Lim to sell up. In recent months, thousands of fans have gathered outside Mestalla before games to protest against the magnate – a majority shareholder since 2014 – who is also the co-owner of League Two Salford City with Gary Neville and other members of the Class of '92. Before February's eventual 2-1 defeat to Athletic Bilbao, Che fans refused to enter the ground before kick-off, chanting, "Lim, go home", even installing street signs pointing to Singapore, 11,116 km away.

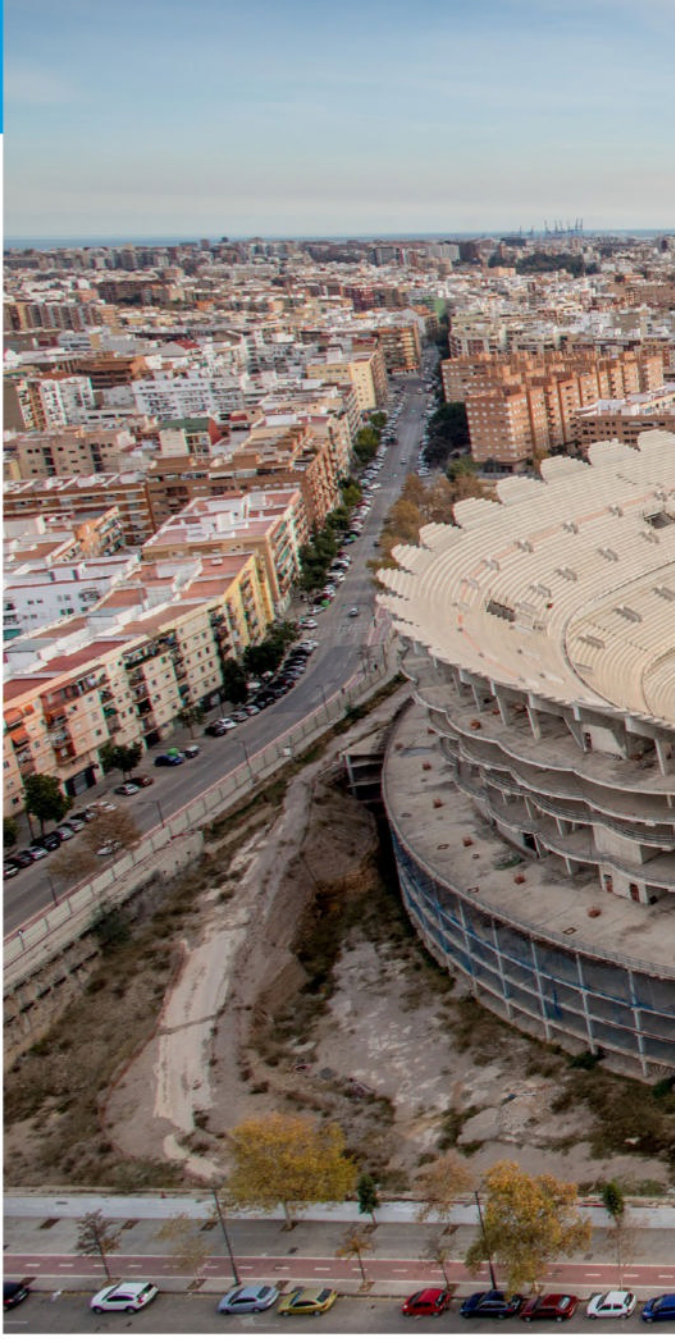
Unlike their eternal ground, Valencia – third in Spain's all-time historic league table just a decade ago – may not survive much longer under Lim's reign of diminishing returns. In the past couple of years, fan collectives such as Libertad VCF have been fighting to recover the club for its people.

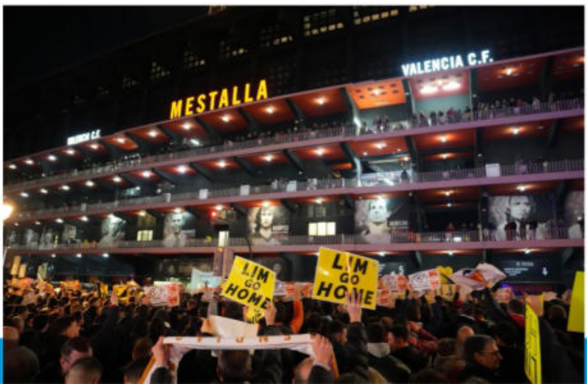
"This is Valencia's worst situation, financially and sportingly," Libertad VCF president Jose Perez explains to *FFT*. "Other administrations have done plenty of harm to the team, but nothing compares to Peter Lim. While those were like a cold, this one is a cancer.

"There's no dialogue between him and the fanbase. It feels like they're constantly trying to divide the supporters between good and bad *Valencianistas* – that's just how mad the whole thing is. For them, good *Valencianistas* are those who cheer up the players. Bad ones are the others who complain and protest in the streets, because they want a different future for their club.

"Lim has never said a word to us – all we hear from him is through international media because he doesn't want to talk to us directly. Perhaps he believes he's on a higher level where he doesn't have to interact with the fans. He's the conqueror that has come to Valencia and this is his colony – he doesn't need to talk to the natives."

That things have reached this point has much to do with what followed that golden era between 2000 and 2004. After notable success, it felt like second place was no longer acceptable. In a bid to stay competitive, Los Che spent like never before, the club's debt rocketing to €550m in four years under Soler.





Clockwise from left Fan protests are now regular outside Mestalla; winning La Liga in 2004; and the UEFA Cup with Rafa; the Lims' ownership soon went sour; white elephant Nou Mestalla remains half-built today

> “NOTHING COMPARES TO LIM. OTHER OWNERS WERE LIKE A COLD, THIS IS A CANCER”

From Ever Banega to Manuel Fernandes, the ex-president is remembered for overpaying in the transfer market and splashing the same amount for several of his new signings: €18m. None of them left a lasting impression.

“Back then, inner power struggles led Soler to becoming Valencia’s largest shareholder and president, kicking off a spell of brainless spending and questionable decision making which ended up with the club on the brink of bankruptcy,” Valencia-based reporter Paco Polit recalls to *FFT*.

Despite a star squad containing David Villa, David Silva and Juan Mata, just one trophy entered the club’s cabinet in that period: the 2008 Copa del Rey. Even that brief moment of jubilation came amid a turbulent season, featuring four managers, in which club icons David Albelda, Santiago Canizares and Miguel Angel Angulo missed the cup final because they had been banished from the first-team squad by Ronald Koeman. The trio even took their own president to court. Soler exited his post at the end of that season and would later be accused of hiring a hitman to abduct his successor, Vicente Soriano. He got a two-year suspended sentence.

“Soriano didn’t survive more than a season due to financial struggles and trouble paying the players’ salaries,” adds Polit. “Manuel Llorente was then appointed as president in 2009, with the Valencian government and banks swooping in to try to save the club.

“His four years decreased the debt and delivered a more modest project, while keeping Valencia consistently in La Liga’s top three. But it only meant the free-falling had been postponed, not ended. Llorente was pressured into departing in 2013 and a new board selected, naming Amadeo Salvo as the president. He tried persuading the banks – owed €200m-plus – to refinance the debt, but they didn’t budge. So a buyout process was kick-started in the final weeks of 2013.”

FAREWELL, GARY NEVILLE

It was then that Lim, a former stockbroker, strolled onto the scene. One of Singapore’s richest people with a net worth of $2.5bn, according to *Forbes*, he’d previously made a bid for Liverpool and also been involved in third-party ownership. After months of negotiation, he agreed to acquire a majority stake in Valencia through his Hong Kong-based investment firm Meriton Holdings in late 2014, for around €100m.

A hero’s welcome awaited Lim, with fans hoping he’d be able to restore Los Che to prominence. The goodwill didn’t last. It soon became apparent that his business partner, Portuguese super agent Jorge Mendes, was behind many of the deals for signings. “Lim runs Valencia as if it were a bunker, without any transparency,” says Perez.

Lim first declared “stability on and off the pitch” as his main target for Valencia, but it’s exactly the lack of it that has contributed to the team’s difficulties. In nine years, Lim has presided over a revolving door of 11 coaches, with 1980s club legend Voro (himself one of the near-dozen permanent bosses) put in temporary charge on five separate occasions. Cult-hero midfielder Ruben Baraja – part of their Liga-winning teams in the early 2000s – is the latest man in the dugout.

Future Wolves and Tottenham coach Nuno Espirito Santo was the first, given just over a year before Lim hired Neville, a personal friend and business partner – the pair have collaborated on cafe, hotel and property projects, as well as Salford. Two problems, however: the former Manchester United defender had no managerial experience and didn’t speak Spanish. Neville failed to win his first nine league games after his December 2015 arrival, but his tenure’s nadir came at the Camp Nou, when his side were thrashed 7-0 by Barcelona in the Copa del Rey.

He held on for another 13 games, beating Rapid Vienna 10-0 on aggregate in the last 32 of the Europa League, but Valencia exited ▶

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to Athletic in the next round and Neville was fired after less than four months. The club were 14th in La Liga. "I should have known I was out of my depth, out of my league, and in a country that spoke a different language," the 85-cap England right-back admitted. "I didn't adapt and I didn't prepare myself."

Much of the support towards Lim among *Valencianistas* had already vanished, but it was truly gone for good after the club beat Barcelona in the 2019 Copa del Rey Final. The businessman didn't visit the dressing room to congratulate the team at the final whistle.

Within months, boss Marcelino was sacked along with sporting director Mateu Alemany, following disagreements over transfer policy. "Whoever took this decision has dragged down an entire team and fanbase," protested former centre-back Ezequiel Garay. "I say it clearly and loudly: it's not fair." The Argentine and others who defended Marcelino quickly followed him out of Mestalla.

Absent from Valencia matches since that year, Lim hasn't had to deal directly with fan criticism. Instead, it was daughter Kim Lim who responded to angry comments on social media. "Some Valencia fans are scolding and cursing my family and I," she revealed on Instagram. "Don't they get it? The club is ours – we can do anything we want with it and no one can say anything."

Is it any wonder that the bond between her father and the *Valencianistas* reached a point of no return? Negativity reached such a crescendo that comments on the club's official social media platforms were turned off for more than a year between May 2021 and June 2022.

"There's 100 per cent no way back," says Polit. "Valencia fans are incapable of ever believing anything Lim's advocates might promise. The level of distrust and disgust is off the charts. He allowed ex-president Anil Murthy to run wild, telling fans to shut up from the executive box during home games.

"Things have only got worse, so fans have already given up. They'll keep going to the stadium and supporting the team, but a big chunk are actively against the owner."

> **"DON'T THE FANS GET IT? THE CLUB IS OURS – WE CAN DO ANYTHING WE WANT WITH IT"**

Above "Well, *we* wanted to win the Copa, even if the owner isn't arsed" **Top** G-Nev couldn't arrest Los Che's decline and lasted just four months

A SLIDE TOWARDS DOOM

Last May, Murthy was given the elbow after local newspaper *Superdeporte* published audio recordings of him allegedly describing Liverpool and Newcastle as "s**t" cities, and threatening to "kill" homegrown midfielder Carlos Soler's reputation if he forced an exit. Soler joined Paris Saint-Germain months later.

Marcelino has also since claimed that the club hierarchy did not want him to win the Copa del Rey in 2019 and that his focus on it was a source of friction, despite it being the club's only trophy in the past 15 years.

"During the season, we received direct and indirect messages that we had to discount it," he said. "The fans wanted to fight for it and the players, too. They didn't tell me why they didn't want the Copa, only that it was a minor tournament and that I was putting Champions League qualification at risk. When I later went to Singapore, I was congratulated for qualifying for the Champions League, but not for winning the Copa."

Such revelations left Perez exasperated. "Lim told Marcelino to not fight for a sporting achievement," he laments. "So what has he bought a football team for?" That question had already been posed to Valencia officials in recent years. "I don't know, I suppose he likes football," responded former director of football Jesus 'Suso' Garcia Pitarch at a press conference. "I'm just speculating." In a rare interview, Lim described the six-time La Liga champions as a "trophy asset" that has been "incredibly good for networking."

Not so good in terms of on-field results, though. In the past 25 years, Valencia have only missed out on European qualification six times, four of them under Lim's control. Having finished fourth in La Liga in 2019, they slipped to ninth a year later and were thrashed by Atalanta in the last 16 of the Champions League, Albert Celades having replaced Marcelino as boss. Then came Javi Gracia, as the club fell further to 13th - Jose Bordalas lifted them back to ninth last term, but he was ousted, too, for Gennaro Gattuso.

With Valencia 14th in La Liga this January, the Italian World Cup winner was inevitably binned. Perennial caretaker Voro stepped in once more, but the club plunged into the relegation zone after three straight defeats, before Baraja's mid-February appointment.

European qualification is far from Los Che's agenda this term, despite having Edinson Cavani – who has struggled to remain fit – Gabriel Paulista and Justin Kluivert in their ranks. After 36 consecutive top-tier seasons, now just avoiding a drop into the Segunda Division will serve as a reason to celebrate.

"Even though there's so much nostalgia about all the glory days, that has to be the main goal," says Aurelio. "If you walk around the city, you can sense a big frustration from the fans with an owner that doesn't seem to care enough. Ultimately, that entire situation ends up affecting the team."

The *Valencianistas* don't even want to contemplate their side playing in the lower leagues. With Lim's representatives insisting that the club won't be sold, they fear for the future. "Relegation is catastrophic, in every single sense," says Polit. "Revenue levels would drop so hard that keeping up with the salaries of the players would be impossible. Also, the ability to pay back debt to both the banks and other creditors would be severely undermined. The situation would become even more desperate than it already is."

Perez concurs. "There's the risk of Valencia not being able to cope with next season's expenses and struggling to register players, which would mean dropping to the third tier," he says. "We were named the world's best club two decades ago. That's something that won't happen again while Lim is in charge."

Amid it all, a half-built Nou Mestalla still stands dormant on the Avenida de las Cortes Valencianas. There's no greater symbol of the club's decline than its mausoleum to what might have been.

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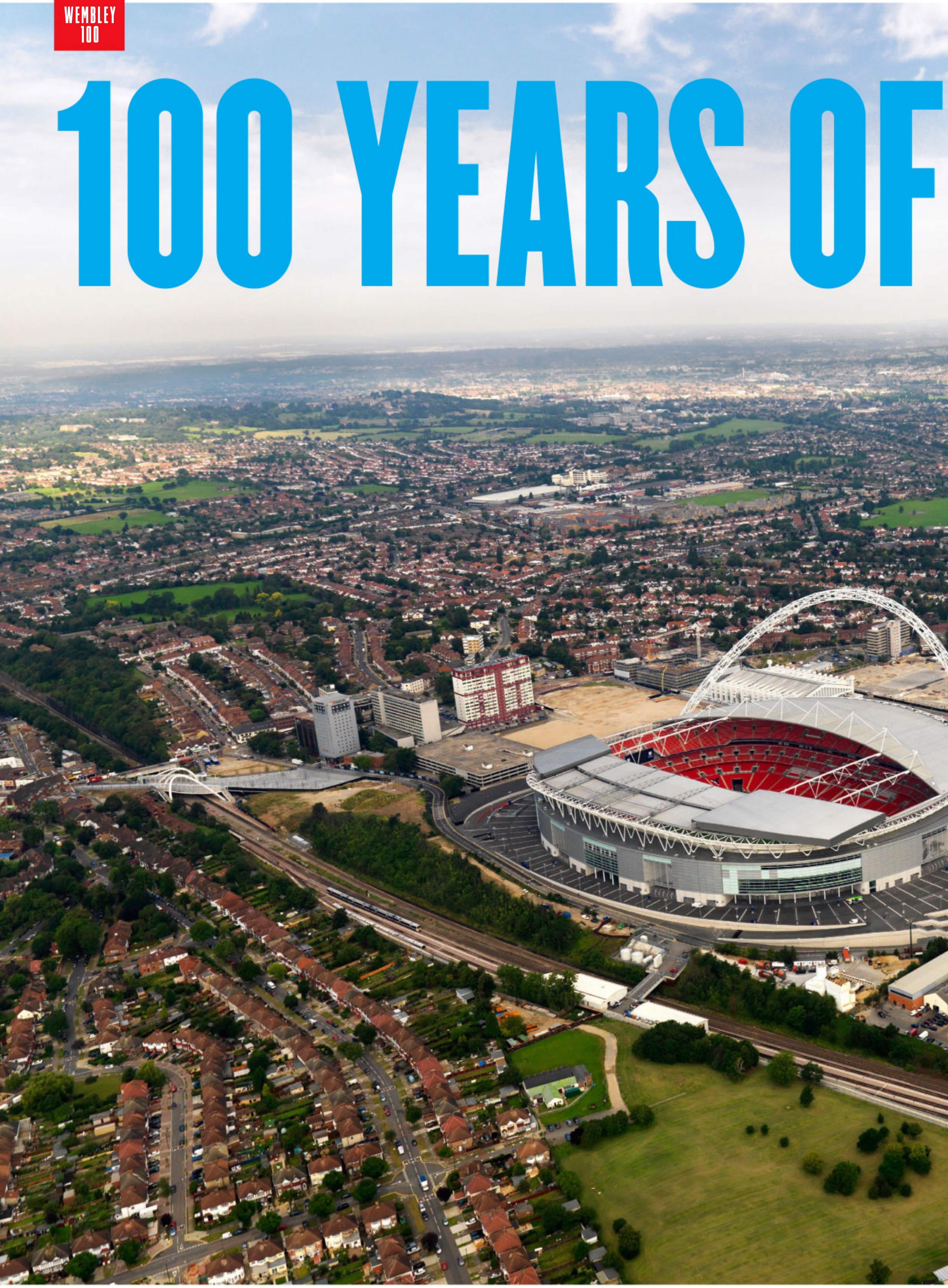


WEMBLEY

England's national stadium celebrates its centenary in April. Ever since it opened in 1923, it's hosted great football history, from the iconic to the downright weird...

Words Chris Flanagan

BOLTON 2-0 WEST HAM 1923

When Wembley Stadium was first built, it was only due to remain open for a year.

Officially known as the Empire Stadium, it was constructed amid the fields of Wembley Park for the 1924 British Empire Exhibition but was ready ahead of schedule, and so it opened for the FA Cup final on April 28, 1923. The showpiece fixture had previously been held at various venues including The Oval, Crystal Palace and Old Trafford, and Stamford Bridge for the previous three seasons.

Around 53,000 people had turned up to Chelsea's ground to watch Huddersfield beat Preston in the 1922 final. This time, an estimated 250,000 wannabe spectators flooded to the new stadium in north-west London – far more than the official capacity attendance of 126,047, which is still a record at Wembley. King George V's motorcade just about found its way through the hordes; no such luck for the Bolton team, who had to walk the last mile of their journey.

Thousands of ticketless fans climbed over walls to get in and 10,000 had spilled onto the pitch come 3pm, the scheduled kick-off time. Crowds were pushed back by mounted police, one of them riding a light grey horse called Billie, which looked white on Pathé's monochrome footage – hence the White Horse Final, as the match became known.

The game finally started 45 minutes late. Bolton's David Jack scored the stadium's first ever goal within three minutes, when a West Ham player got tangled up with pitchside spectators after taking a throw-in; Jack's shot was so powerful that it knocked out a fan stood right behind the goal. Jack Smith added a second – West Ham complained that the shot had hit the post, but the referee adjudged that it had gone in before being kicked out of the goal by a spectator. Now that *would* be an entertaining VAR interlude.

The match was halted for a time as injured fans were treated, with reports that as many as 1,000 people were wounded that day. MPs blamed hooliganism as Parliament debated whether the disorganised scenes meant that Wembley should never host a football match again. Thankfully, that didn't come to pass.

ENGLAND 1-1 SCOTLAND 1924

In stark contrast to the White Horse Final, only 37,250 people watched Wembley's first ever international match. There was a full First Division fixture list on the same day.

England had already lost to both Ireland and Wales in that year's British Home Championship when Scotland came to town. They drew and the hosts finished bottom.

EALING ASSOCIATION 0-4 IPSWICH 1928

A non-league side set up home at Wembley in the late 1920s. It didn't go well.

Stadium owner Arthur Elvin agreed to rent the venue for four months to an ambitious new club called Argonauts, who wanted to join the Football League. One problem: their application was rejected, so the club never even got started, but they still had a rental agreement to honour. Reigning Southern Amateur League champs Ealing Association moved in instead while their own ground had repairs, and they beat Hastings & St Leonards in their first fixture under the Twin Towers.

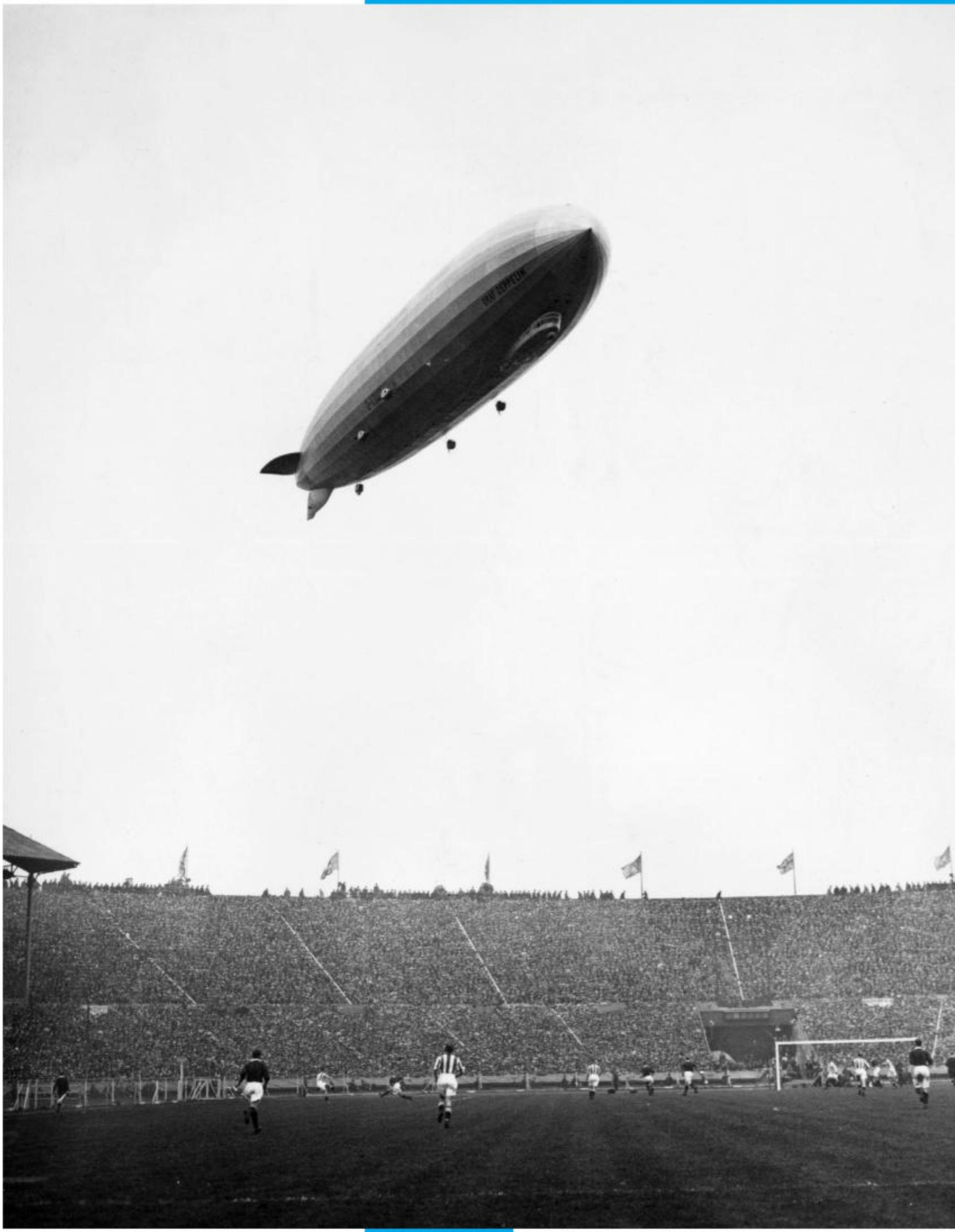
Things went downhill after that. Ipswich won the next match 4-0 and Ealing lost six of their eight games at the stadium, then were relegated. Average Wembley attendance: 50.

ARSENAL 2-0 HUDDERSFIELD 1930

In the second half of the 1930 FA Cup Final, a German Zeppelin loomed over Wembley.

The match was briefly halted as the world's biggest airship hovered low. The pilot dipped the passenger ship's nose to salute the king, then headed on towards RAF Cardington in Bedfordshire. Some of the crowd booed – 15 years earlier, Zeppelins had bombed London.

Arsenal went on to claim their first FA Cup, under legendary boss Herbert Chapman, who had joined them *from* Huddersfield in 1925.



Above A spectre from a past that the spectators at Wembley wished they could forget

ENGLAND 0-1 WALES 1940

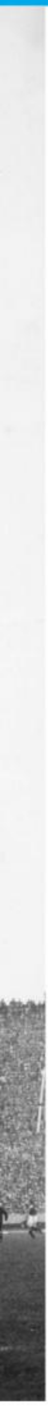
Global conflict had returned when England hosted Wales in this wartime international.

A reduced attendance of 40,000 spectators was allowed, and the Three Lions fielded several players serving in the armed forces, including Stanley Matthews – stationed with the RAF in Blackpool – and Denis Compton, Arsenal's football/cricket superstar who was working, appropriately, as a gunner. Wales won Wembley's first fixture in almost a year.

GREAT BRITAIN 1-3 YUGOSLAVIA 1948

Wembley Stadium didn't exist when London hosted the Olympics in 1908. Four decades later, it staged the 1948 Games' semi-finals and medal matches. Early rounds had been in stadiums as varied as White Hart Lane, Fratton Park and Dulwich's Champion Hill.

A Great Britain side made up of little-known amateurs had done well to reach the semis under Manchester United boss Matt Busby,



but lost 3-1 to Yugoslavia at Wembley and then, two days later at the same venue, 5-3 to Denmark in the bronze medal match. Gold went to Sweden, led by the famous Gre-No-Li trio – Gunnar Gren, Gunnar Nordahl and Nils Liedholm – who all joined Milan the next year.

BLACKPOOL 4-3 BOLTON 1953

Only one man has ever hit an FA Cup final hat-trick at Wembley. The match was still named after someone else instead.

Stan Mortensen netted thrice as Blackpool dramatically beat Bolton, yet the game was then known as The Matthews Final, after the outstanding Stanley Matthews finally lifted his first major trophy aged 38 (though he'd continue to play for another 12 years). When Mortensen passed away in 1991, some wags dubbed his farewell The Matthews Funeral.

ENGLAND 3-6 HUNGARY 1953

Wembley hosted another high-scoring thriller six months later, albeit a bit more one-sided.

England had been unbeaten at Wembley for 30 years since its opening, until Ferenc Puskas & Co rocked up and stunned 105,000 spectators by charging into a 4-1 lead inside half an hour. En route to an infamous Three Lions defeat in what became known as The Match of the Century, Puskas' dragback for 3-1 so bamboozled Billy Wright that the legendary defender was described as looking like "a fire engine rushing to the wrong fire".

Hungary had 35 shots to England's five, comprehensively winning the all-important xG battle. Leading 6-2 after 53 minutes, the Magyars could have reached double figures.

LONDON XI 3-2 FRANKFURT XI 1955

The first Inter-Cities Fairs Cup took place over the course of three whole seasons from 1955 to 1958, its 12 teams including Inter, Birmingham City and a makeshift London XI.

The UEFA Cup's predecessor originally brought together European cities that hosted trade fairs. After winning 5-0 in Switzerland against a Basel XI, London faced Frankfurt in Wembley's first ever floodlit fixture, with a team of players from Chelsea, Tottenham, Millwall, Fulham, Charlton and Leyton Orient.

Bedford Jezzard scored twice and Fulham team-mate Bobby Robson once, as a 2-0 half-time deficit was turned into a 3-2 win under the lights. It took London 17 months to wrap up their two remaining group-stage fixtures, then another year to play the semis and final, by which time Jezzard had retired. London drew 2-2 with Barcelona at Stamford Bridge, Jimmy Greaves scoring on his club's turf, but lost the return 6-0 at the Camp Nou.

ENGLAND 9-3 SCOTLAND 1961

Goalkeeper Frank Haffey escaped through a window to play for Scotland at Wembley. He must have wished he hadn't bothered.

Worried about the effect that a trip to the bright lights of London might have on an impressionable 22-year-old, Haffey's sister locked him in his bedroom to stop him going. A flawed plan: their Glasgow flat was on the ground floor. He climbed out of the window.

Haffey could do little to prevent England winning 9-3 in his second, and last, outing for Scotland. Not that it got him down – he broke into song in the team bath afterwards, then agreed to pose for press photos on Platform Nine at King's Cross and under Big Ben at 9.03pm. He later moved to Australia and became a singer, comedian and actor.

Top to bottom England stuffed the Scots in '61; Eusebio lets fly; Busby gives his Babes a demo; Wembley's Twin Towers: historic

MILAN 2-1 BENFICA 1963

Only 45,715 fans attended Wembley's first European Cup final – because it was played at 3pm on a Wednesday. Three years after 127,621 were present to witness Real Madrid thrash Eintracht Frankfurt 7-3 at Hampden Park, a more modest crowd watched Benfica try to win a third successive European Cup.

Alas, manager Bela Guttmann had quit after the 1962 final, dramatically declaring, "Not in a hundred years will Benfica ever be European champions again." Eusebio fired them ahead at Wembley, but Milan hit back and their reign came to an end. Still, it's only another 39 years until Bela's curse expires.

WEST HAM 2-0 1860 MUNICH 1965

The only continental triumph in West Ham's history (no, the Intertoto Cup doesn't count) came just 12 miles from Upton Park.

In front of nearly 98,000 spectators, Alan Sealey was the unlikely hero in the European Cup Winners' Cup final, notching both goals having scored only three times previously in the entire campaign. A year after lifting the FA Cup, Bobby Moore held the trophy aloft.

"Who knows: in just over a year's time, he might be standing on the same spot with the World Cup in his hands..." commentator Kenneth Wolstenholme mused.

Maybe, Ken. Maybe.

ENGLAND 4-2 WEST GERMANY 1966

West Germany lost out in a rival bid to host the 1966 World Cup – then lost the final, too.

Wembley staged nine games throughout the tournament; it would have been 10, but France vs Uruguay was moved to White City to avoid a clash with a greyhound meeting.

Just under 97,000 fans gathered for the final, the highest attendance for a World Cup showpiece on European soil – unsurprising, when you consider that everybody you know from that era claims to have been there. The match has a legacy in Germany as well as in England: after Geoff Hurst's controversial second goal, any shot that bounces off the bar and lands on the goal-line is known in Germany as a 'Wembley-Tor', ie a 'Wembley Goal'. Fair enough, really.

MANCHESTER UNITED 4-1 BENFICA 1968

Bobby Charlton hadn't found the net in eight appearances during Manchester United's run to the European Cup final, but he popped in a pair when it mattered most.

Two years after helping England to win the World Cup, he was back at Wembley beating Eusebio once again – Charlton had bagged a brace against Portugal in the World Cup semi-final – as Manchester United became the first English side to lift the European Cup. Eusebio played four matches at Wembley in his career, and lost all four of them. ▶

SWINDON 3-1 ARSENAL 1969

After six years of two-legged showdowns, the League Cup final was moved to Wembley in 1967 – and within two years, it had been the venue for two major upsets.

First, QPR became the first Third Division side ever to win a major trophy, as a young Rodney Marsh helped them to beat top-flight West Bromwich Albion. Then Swindon, also of the third tier, improbably defeated Arsenal. Don Rogers scored twice in extra time as the Gunners, who'd called off their last game due to flu, got stuck in the mud after a week of rain had followed an England international. "The pitch was really bad," Rogers said later, "but it was in good nick compared to ours."

AJAX 2-0 PANATHINAIKOS 1971

Wembley was the venue for the first of Ajax's three successive European Cup final wins in the 1970s. It was the culmination of Rinus Michels' Total Football project, as the Dutch side conquered Europe for the first time; job done, the manager then went to Barcelona.

The fabulously-named Dick van Dijk gave Michels' charges a fifth-minute lead, leaving the Greeks fearing diagnosis: murder. A rout didn't materialise, although Johan Cruyff did tee up Arie Haan late on to make it 2-0.

THE THREE 2-0 THE SIX 1973

The UK, Denmark and the Republic of Ireland all joined the European Economic Community on New Year's Day, 1973. Two days later, they celebrated with a special all-star match.

Coached by Sir Alf Ramsey, players from the three new members, including Bobby Moore, Pat Jennings, Johnny Giles, Peter Lorimer and Henning Jensen but no Welshmen, took on a team of superstars from Belgium, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Luxembourg – cruelly unrepresented – and West Germany, the six founder members of the EEC (later to become the European Union). Messrs Beckenbauer, Neeskens, Zoff, Muller et al were defeated in front of a sparse crowd on Bobby Charlton's final appearance at Wembley.

Fifty years later, we're yet to see the Brexit All-Star Game we were promised on that bus.

ENGLAND 1-1 POLAND 1973

The Three Lions had never failed to qualify for a World Cup... then Jan Tomaszewski arrived.

Having gone down 2-0 in Katowice, Sir Alf's squad needed to defeat Poland at Wembley. They had annihilated Austria 7-0 without the scapegoated Bobby Moore; now they just had to get past "a circus clown in gloves", as TV pundit Brian Clough called Tomaszewski.

But Tomaszewski was brilliant. Allan Clarke rectified Peter Shilton's error, yet even with 39 shots to Poland's two, and 23 corners to their none, England took a custard pie to the face.

ENGLAND 1-2 SCOTLAND 1977

In 1975, Scotland lost 5-1 at Wembley. In '77 they wrought vengeance on its woodwork.

Against an England side about to miss out on the World Cup again, Ally MacLeod's men showed why they *were* going to Argentina, beating the Auld Enemy through goals from Gordon McQueen and Kenny Dalglish (both, coincidentally, had daughters who'd become Sky Sports presenters). Cue a pitch invasion by thousands of jubilant Scots, featuring Rod Stewart, a broken crossbar and a 20-year-old Gordon Strachan on honeymoon, after he'd moved his wedding forward for the match.

In the aftermath, England manager Don Revie gave up his post and his reputation by leaving to manage the United Arab Emirates.

LIVERPOOL 1-0 CLUB BRUGGE 1978

Scots enjoyed more Wembley success in '78, helping Liverpool to retain the European Cup.

Twelve months after the Reds defeated Borussia Monchengladbach in Rome, a young Alan Hansen started in defence against Club Brugge in place of Tommy Smith – ruled out after dropping a pickaxe on his foot, naturally – while Graeme Souness set up Dalglish to score at Wembley again with a deft little dink.

Above Van Dijk heads Ajax into the lead against Panathinaikos **Below** Villa's opening goal in the 1981 FA Cup Final replay was more emphatic than hypnotic

TOTTENHAM 3-2 MANCHESTER CITY 1981

The stadium's first ever FA Cup final replay featured an individual goal for the ages.

Incredibly, given that penalty shootouts weren't a thing back then, only one cup final replay had been required over the previous 58 years, and Chelsea and Leeds had played theirs at Old Trafford in 1970. Wembley later held replays in 1982, 1983, 1990 and 1993, but none produced a goal as special as Ricky Villa's slaloming winner against Manchester City, a dribble every bit as silky as his beard.

SOUTHEAST CARDINALS 1-0 MILLWALL LIONESSES 1987

Fully 64 years after Wembley opened, it held its maiden 11-a-side women's – or girls' – football fixture (hockey had got there first).

The visit of Cincinnati's Southeast Cardinals, reigning Under-14s Ohio state champions, was part of the London International Football Festival, featuring teams from locations as varied as Armenia and Vietnam. Every other game took place on a municipal playing field in nearby Northwick Park, but 3,000 people made the most of the free admission at Wembley to see a Millwall youth team face the Cardinals over two 15-minute halves.

The pitch probably couldn't have handled much longer than that: it was still recovering from four consecutive nights of Genesis gigs.

NOTTINGHAM FOREST 0-0 SHEFFIELD WEDNESDAY 1988

The Football League's centennial tournament at Wembley had a curious selection of teams.

Following on from an all-star match that pitted a Football League XI against the Rest of World (including Diego Maradona, booed

mercilessly after the Hand of God incident), the Mercantile Credit Football Festival had been intended as a six-a-side competition between all 92 clubs. It became an 11-a-side event featuring 16 outfits from across the four divisions, invited based on league points.

And so fourth-tier Tranmere joined the likes of Liverpool and Manchester United at Wembley, in a two-day April event with clubs playing two 40-minute games on Saturday, then semi-finals – which featured Tranmere, to their (Mercantile) credit – and the final over 60 minutes on Sunday. Brian Clough didn't even turn up for the first day, but his Nottingham Forest side bagged the cup with a shootout win in front of just 17,000 fans.

ENGLAND WOMEN 0-2 SWEDEN WOMEN 1989

England's women also made an appearance at the Mercantile Credit Football Festival. They were due to play a 30-minute match against the Netherlands but instead met the Republic of Ireland after the Dutch pulled out, insulted by the amount of game time on offer.

The Lionesses had to wait another year for their first full international at Wembley. At long last, they lost to Sweden, as a warm-up to England's men drawing 0-0 with Chile.

CAMBRIDGE 1-0 CHESTERFIELD 1990

The Football League debuted end-of-season play-offs in 1987, but the first three years' finals were played over two legs before they were shifted to one-off ties at the national stadium on the May Bank Holiday weekend.

The first one was a Fourth Division play-off final involving Cambridge and Chesterfield. In a duel between a young Dion Dublin and a younger Sean Dyche, Dublin got the only goal, earning promotion for John Beck's U's.

BARCELONA 1-0 SAMPDORIA 1992

Barcelona's long wait to win a European Cup ended at Wembley in 1992, manager Johan Cruyff leading his Dream Team to glory in the stadium where he had become a continental champion for the first time with Ajax.

Ronald Koeman's extra-time free-kick was enough to defeat the Sampdoria of Roberto Mancini and Gianluca Vialli, prompting Barça president Joan Gaspart to fulfil a promise and have a 4am dip in a nippy River Thames.

WEMBLEY WELCOMES BARCELONA AND SAMPDORIA
BENVENUTI

Top to bottom Try being as cool as Johan Cruyff – it just can't be done; cheers for heroes dressed in grey; Batigol buries Arsenal; "Sorry, Dychey..."

NOTTS COUNTY 2-1 ASCOLI 1995

A year before Oliver Bierhoff got the winner in the final of Euro 96, he was losing to Notts County at the very same venue. The German joined Ascoli in 1991, only for them to drop into Serie B and end up in the Anglo-Italian Cup, facing clubs from England's second tier.

The relaunched competition had a final at Wembley in each of its four seasons. In 1993, Cremonese beat Derby, then Gheorghe Hagi helped Brescia to defeat Notts County, just months before he was named in the World Cup's team of the tournament. Notts County avenged that defeat against Bierhoff's Ascoli, and finally Vincenzo Montella scored a bicycle kick for Genoa in a 1996 win over Port Vale – a sentence so weird that it was immediately decided to cancel the tournament forever.

ENGLAND 0-0 COLOMBIA 1995

Missing USA 94 and qualifying automatically for Euro 96 as hosts meant England played a *lot* of friendlies in the mid-90s. Rene Higuita provided a reason to remember one, at least.

Five years after his madcap Italia 90 antics, the Colombian goalkeeper spent most of the pre-match warm-up at Wembley testing out a scorpion kick. Instead of catching the ball as any sane person would, he'd acrobatically leap and try to volley it away with his heels.

He then had the audacity to attempt it during the match, from a misplaced Jamie Redknapp chip. He succeeded, too – although the flag was up for offside, so it technically wasn't a save. Sorry, Rene, have another go.

ENGLAND 1-1 GERMANY 1996

"Achtung! Surrender – for you Fritz, ze Euro 96 Championship is over!" declared the *Mirror*'s front page, classily, ahead of England's home semi-final against Germany. Complaints forced editor Piers Morgan to abandon plans to send a tank to the offices of German paper *Bild*, and a Spitfire over the Germany squad's training ground. Depressingly, this isn't a joke.

England were on a wave of optimism after a 4-1 win over the Dutch, but the dream died as Andreas Kopke saved Gareth Southgate's penalty. "Football did come home," sighed *Three Lions* star Frank Skinner, "but someone parked a big Audi across the driveway".

Some fans, making their way home after the match, let their frustration get the better of them. When their train pulled in at New Southgate in north London, they got off and smashed the station sign. That showed him.

ARSENAL 0-1 FIORENTINA 1999

Arsenal's decision to move their Champions League home fixtures to Wembley for two seasons was unpopular... and unsuccessful.

The club opted for the switch when they reached the rebranded European Cup for the first time, explaining that its regulations for taller advertising hoardings pitchside might reduce Highbury's capacity by up to 6,000.

Fans were disappointed but, nonetheless, crowds north of 73,000 went to Wembley. Arsenal drew 1-1 with Dynamo Kyiv and lost at home to Lens to exit at the group phase in 1998-99, then went out at the same stage again a season later after Gabriel Batistuta's thunderbolt gave Fiorentina a narrow victory.

ENGLAND 0-1 GERMANY 2000

Four years on from scuppering England's hopes of Euro 96 success, Germany ruined their Wembley farewell, too.

Three Lions boss Kevin Keegan seemed to know what was coming, declaring in his inimitable way before the World Cup qualifier that, "I could be known as that man – the last man to lose at Wembley. I don't want to be known as that man."

But he was that man. On a drenched pitch, Didi Hamann's absurdly long-range effort slipped through David Seaman and Keegan promptly resigned in a toilet cubicle.

Wembley was demolished less promptly: the bulldozers rolled in a full two years after Hamann's free-kick did the same (by way of contrast, Tottenham began knocking down White Hart Lane in 2017 the day after its final match). Eventually, however, England had a new home on the same hallowed ground... ▸

ENGLAND U21 3-3 ITALY U21 2007

When the new Wembley Stadium eventually opened seven years later, Nigel Pearson was managing England. Well, England Under-21s.

The redevelopment wasn't supposed to take so long; however, delays and spiralling costs were never out of the news cycle. The old arena's Twin Towers were demolished in 2003 – the same year that the new venue was meant to be completed. Finally in 2007, following an informal match between the stadium owners and the builders in order to check the floodlights, and then a charity fixture used as a test event with only Brent residents invited, the stadium's first official game saw the Three Lions' under-21s take on their Italian counterparts.

England conceded after 29 seconds. Many of the 55,700 spectators present – capacity was still reduced as part of a safety certificate ramp-up – hadn't yet taken their seats under the shiny new arch when Giampaolo Pazzini beat Lee Camp from long range, en route to a hat-trick. Fortunately for the hosts, goals from David Bentley, Wayne Routledge and Matt Derbyshire spared England's blushes and the new home any ostrich-based rants.

ENGLAND 2-3 CROATIA 2007

The England senior team's last game at the old Wembley ended with misery in the rain, and it didn't take long for them to experience deja vu at the new gaff.

Five months after their first match at the stadium, a 1-1 friendly draw with Brazil, all they needed was a draw at home to Croatia to reach Euro 2008. What could go wrong?

Quite a lot, in fact. With Wayne Rooney, Michael Owen, Rio Ferdinand, John Terry, Ashley Cole and Gary Neville all absent, the Three Lions went behind when Scott Carson, winning only his second cap, blundered to let Niko Kranjcar score. "More Frank Carson than Scott," grouched Mark Lawrenson, hilariously.

Steve McClaren watched aghast as Mladen Petric's rocket rendered England's subsequent comeback meaningless. He was sacked a day later, having at least managed to pop to the toilet post-match without resigning.

BARCELONA 3-1 MANCHESTER UNITED 2011

What's the greatest ever team performance in a final? The Azteca in Mexico provided the stage for Brazil's 1970 World Cup Final masterclass against Italy. Wembley saw the pinnacle of arguably the best club team ever.

Pep Guardiola's Barcelona swept all before them during his four years at the helm, and never were they more impressive than in their 2011 Champions League Final against Manchester United. In a comprehensive victory, Pedro, Lionel Messi and David Villa scored from three of Barça's 12 shots on target; United had one on target – Rooney's equaliser – and just four shots of any kind, primarily because they couldn't get the ball.

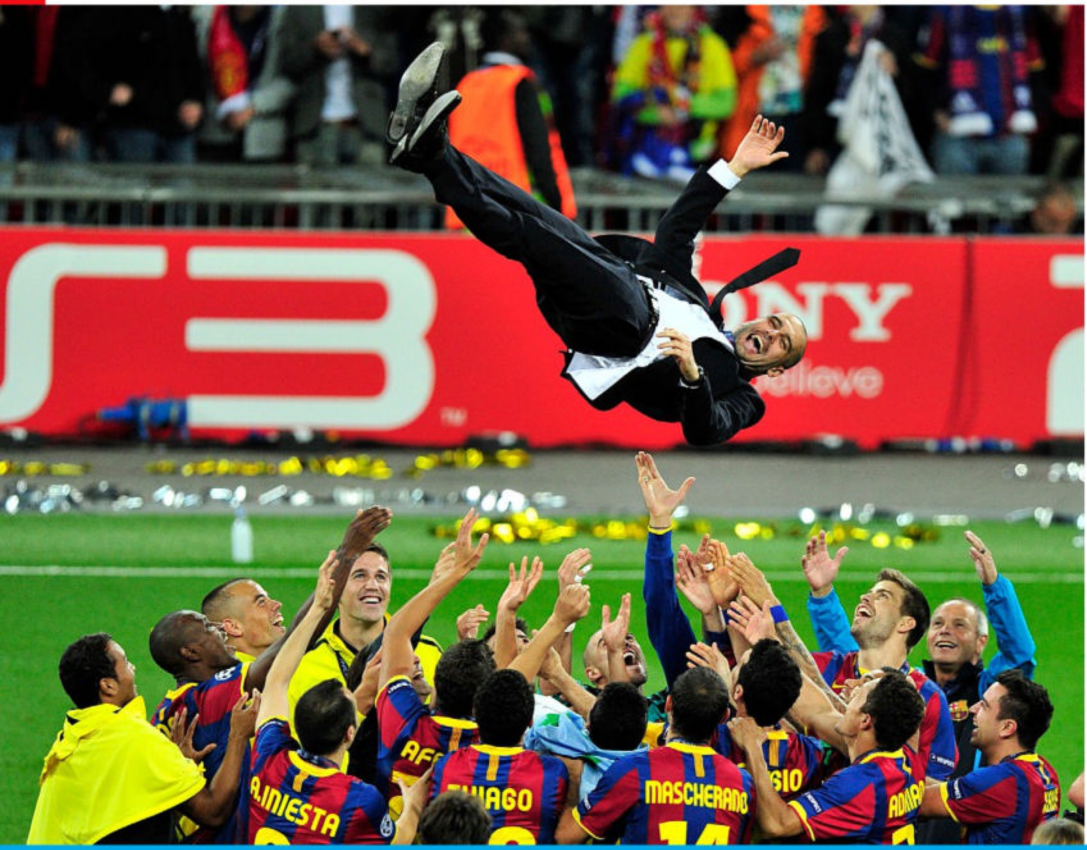
Some 19 years after becoming a European champion with Barcelona at Wembley as a player, Pep had done the same as a coach.

GREAT BRITAIN WOMEN 1-0 BRAZIL WOMEN 2012

Before the 2012 London Olympics, much of the football focus was on Team GB having a men's team, featuring five Welshmen and captained by Ryan Giggs, who'd retired from international duty in 2007. Thankfully, it was the women's team who left a greater legacy.

While the men's only match at Wembley saw them defeat the United Arab Emirates 3-1, before they succumbed to South Korea in Cardiff, the women captured hearts by beating Brazil at England's national stadium in front of a crowd of more than 70,000 eager fans, thanks to a Steph Houghton goal.

Though they didn't quite make it back to Wembley for the final – beaten in the last eight by Canada, in Coventry of all places – the win over Brazil helped to accelerate the rise of the women's game on British shores.



TOTTENHAM 1-0 ARSENAL 2018

Tottenham set an attendance record when they played their Champions League fixtures at Wembley in 2016-17, and another when they moved there on a more regular basis.

Taking advantage of the national stadium's biggest capacity, Spurs moved their European matches to the venue in White Hart Lane's final campaign, and 85,512 supporters saw them lose to Bayer Leverkusen – the biggest ever gate for a home club game in England.

After White Hart Lane was demolished, Spurs played all of their home matches at Wembley for 20 months. The 83,222-strong crowd that watched them beat Arsenal in the North (West) London Derby is the Premier

League's record attendance, and won't be topped unless anybody else moves there.

It was also just 38 short of the top-flight record, set when Manchester United hosted Arsenal at Maine Road in 1948 while Old Trafford underwent wartime bombing repairs.

NORTHAMPTON 4-0 EXETER 2020

Three months after the COVID-19 pandemic halted football, an empty Wembley Stadium reopened with the Football League play-offs.

In eerie near-silence, Northampton gubbed Exeter 4-0 in the League Two play-off final at the end of June. Wycombe won the League One showpiece a fortnight later and then, on a Tuesday night in early August, Fulham beat Brentford 1-0 in the Championship final with a divine Joe Bryan free-kick.

Some Wembley fixtures were postponed for a whole year due to the disruption. The 2020 and 2021 Football League Trophy finals were held on the same weekend in March 2021, two months before the 2020 FA Trophy Final took place – a delay so long that winners Harrogate, having almost completed their maiden Football League season, technically weren't eligible to take part in it any more.

Left "I must go now. My planet needs me back." **Top** England's women restored pride after 2021 **Above** The 4-0 play-off defeat stunned Exeter fans into silence

ENGLAND 1-1 ITALY 2021

Wembley had been due to host three fixtures at Euro 2020. In the end, it staged eight.

Originally awarded just the semis and final, it added three group games and a last-16 tie after the building of Brussels' Eurostadium was delayed (and later shelved altogether). When Dublin also withdrew due to COVID restrictions, another last-16 tie was switched to Wembley, handing its owners crucial home advantage for their win over Germany. In all, 17 of the 18 matches played by England in their three most successful tournaments – 1966, 1996 and 2021 – were at Wembley.

And things looked rosy when England beat Denmark to reach their first final since 1966. The day itself, however, was a nightmare. In dangerous scenes, hundreds of England fans broke into the stadium without tickets, then manager Gareth Southgate lost in a penalty shootout once again – a sight more painful, even, than the supporter who put a lit flare up his backside in Leicester Square.

But the final brought redemption for Italy manager Roberto Mancini and his assistant, the late Gianluca Vialli: 29 years after losing the European Cup final with Sampdoria at Wembley, they were continental champions.

ENGLAND WOMEN 2-1 GERMANY WOMEN 2022

A year later, England's women cleared that last hurdle. Only 35 years earlier, Wembley had never held a women's football match. Now it welcomed a sell-out crowd of 87,192, the highest ever attendance for the final of a men's or women's European Championship, to see the Lionesses win a first major trophy.

In a gripping encounter against Germany (who else?), punctuated by Jill Scott telling opponent Sydney Lohmann to "f**k off, you f**king prick", England won 2-1 in extra time.

In 100 years, rarely has Wembley seen such joyous scenes at the final whistle.

To read about many more famous games from the history of England's national stadium, buy Nige Tassell's new book, 'Field of Dreams: 100 Years of Wembley in 100 Matches' – available now (Simon & Schuster)

FIELD
OF
DREAMS
100 YEARS OF WEMBLEY IN 100 MATCHES
NIGE TASSELL

THE WSL HAALAND

Manchester City boast this season’s deadliest strikers in the men’s and women’s top flights. Khadija ‘Bunny’ Shaw tells *FFT* how carrots, peri-peri chicken and lots of patience have taken her from Jamaica to a possible Golden Boot...

Words Jessy Parker Humphreys

“Do you know what I really enjoy doing in England? Going to Nando’s.”

Khadija Shaw’s footballing journey has taken her halfway around the world, from her origins in Jamaica to the land of fish and chips, steak and kidney pie and bangers and mash. In the end, though, a South African chicken chain has most caught her attention since joining Manchester City in June 2021.

“I remember having a chat with [captain] Steph Houghton,” the goal-getter chuckles now. “She said, ‘Have you ever tried Nando’s?’ I was like, ‘What’s that?’ She told me I had to try it, so I went home to my uncle and told him I wanted to go to Nando’s!”

If moving to a country where some of her relatives already lived “five minutes down the road” was pretty handy, the prevalence of peri-peri chicken was quite the bonus. No such eateries – cheeky or otherwise – existed at her previous club Bordeaux. The franchise doesn’t even exist in France, nor in Jamaica.

Known to most people as ‘Bunny’ because she loved eating carrots as a child – her older brother Kentardo gave her the nickname – what Shaw soon discovered at Nando’s was a culinary revelation every bit as satisfying, fiery and marinated to perfection as her own Manchester City career. The centre-forward plundered 26 goals in the first 22 games of her second City season – a club record for a single campaign, including four in an FA Cup romp at Bristol City. By early March, her strike rate bettered men’s talisman Erling Haaland. That’s peri-peri good company to keep, eh?

As *FFT* sits down to speak to the Jamaican international, Shaw says she is yet to meet Haaland. “We haven’t really seen him, but hopefully if we get the chance, we can have a conversation,” she confirms.

Like her City counterpart, Shaw has always found the back of the net, regardless of club. Standing at just shy of 6ft tall, the 26-year-old’s frame is often used to explain why she so regularly dominates defenders, but that doesn’t tell the whole story of a striker vying to be one of the best in the world.

“I’VE GROWN INTO MY PHYSICALITY – THERE AREN’T MANY WHO CAN MATCH UP TO ME”

Above Shaw’s eye for goal has kept plenty of WSL defenders busy this term

“I’ve grown into my physicality,” says Shaw. “Initially I shied away from it, but the more games I play, the more I take pride in certain areas, physicality included. There aren’t many players who can match up to me.”

Born in Spanish Town, Jamaica, she began to progress as a teenage talent within the US college system, first at Eastern Florida State College Titans, then Tennessee Volunteers, before entering the semi-professional game with Florida Krush.

In June 2019, aged 22, Shaw switched to top-tier French side Bordeaux. Her real desire had always been to play in England, but she didn’t have the requisite number of points to secure a UK work permit.

By the time her Bordeaux deal expired two years later, she’d become one of the world’s most in-demand players, having just topped the goal chart in a league that also contained Ballon d’Or winner Ada Hegerberg and Marie-Antoinette Katoto, now Paris Saint-Germain’s ▶

Above Shaw put four past Bristol City in February to bag a matchball

all-time leading scorer. “The level of play and quality of teams in France is really just Lyon and PSG,” admits Shaw. “Here in England, it’s hugely competitive – you see how close the games are.”

Shaw swapped Bordeaux for Manchester in the summer of 2021. In her maiden season she scored four goals en route to lifting the League Cup last March, but lost the FA Cup final to Chelsea and came third in the WSL. It was the first time City had finished outside the top two since 2014.

Despite her goalscoring prowess in France, Shaw had joined a club where Ellen White was City’s established starting striker. Head coach Gareth Taylor shared minutes between his two forwards, who would understandably expect to feature more often than not, with White starting 13 league matches to Shaw’s nine. Was it a surprise to the Jamaican that she wasn’t in Taylor’s XI regularly?

“I knew what I was coming into,” she says. “For me, it was about getting familiar with the style of play, my new team-mates and learning all their strengths and weaknesses. In my first year, I was just trying to get a full understanding of everything.”

Far from hindering her, Shaw believes that sharing minutes with White had its benefits. “We actually helped each other, both from a competition standpoint and a motivation standpoint,” she insists. “If the team-sheet came out and I was starting, she’d come to me and give me pointers. Looking from the outside, it might have seemed like a rivalry between us, but we were always trying to do the best we could for the team.”

Shortly after England’s Euro 2022 triumph, White surprisingly announced her retirement from football at the age of 33, later revealing that she’d been hampered by a punctured lung sustained while receiving acupuncture treatment. Shaw suddenly had the chance to cement herself as City’s undisputed leading striker, even if the squad went through other changes over the summer. Lucy Bronze, Keira Walsh, Caroline Weir and Georgia Stanway all went abroad – Bronze and Walsh signed for Barcelona, Weir headed to Real Madrid and Stanway to Bayern Munich.

“We lost quite a lot of experience,” reflects the Jamaican. She pauses, picking her words carefully as she considers the scale of recent change. “It’s just about trusting the process and the journey. That’s what Gaz [Taylor] is always telling us – believing that if we do the right things, then in spite of losing that vast experience, we can achieve success.”

There was an early test of that mentality. In August, the Blues were dumped out of Champions League qualifying against Real Madrid, for whom Weir inevitably scored the winner. Shaw moved to Europe with a dream of playing in the competition, but is still yet to reach the group stage.

The club’s opening two WSL matches this term also ended in defeat (to Aston Villa and Chelsea), leaving them with major work to do in a title race where only the supremely consistent prevail. By early March, though, City had gone 13 games unbeaten, beating Arsenal to climb back to third place – behind Manchester United and Chelsea – in an ever more competitive league.

Nor did the team lose all of their Lionesses heroes – either side of Shaw in City’s fluid front three are Lauren Hemp and Wembley match-winner Chloe Kelly. Shaw has made hay, and at the beginning of March she led the WSL goalscoring chart on 15, more than double that of Chelsea’s Sam Kerr, holder of the last two Golden Boots.

Watching City’s attack this campaign has sometimes felt like opposition defences are playing Whac-A-Mole – as soon as they’ve figured out how to deal with one of the trio, the other two pop up.

“Lauren has an understanding of where I’m going to be, the runs I want to make,” says Shaw. “I’ve only started playing with Chloe this year. She was injured for most of last season, so it took a bit more time on the training pitch, getting familiar with each other. But as things have progressed, we’ve got to understand each other more.

“They’re two amazing players. One against one, they can take anybody on. It’s just for me to be in the right area and stay alive for the scruffy bits!”

She’s benefited from advice from Raheem Sterling, another Jamaica-born forward who was at City for Shaw’s debut season at the club, before he left for Chelsea.

“Raheem would say, ‘Always be active’,” she explains. “You’re not always going to get the perfect ball, but it’s about staying alive and being active in the moment. I started having that mentality in training, and now I feel like it’s starting to happen in games.”

Shaw is keen to point out her goalscoring form has also opened up opportunities for team-mates. Against Manchester United in December, midfielder Laura Coombs netted City’s leveller unmarked after two defenders attempted to marshal Shaw.

“I want to help the team win however I can, whether that means dragging two players away like in the derby,” she adds. “Those little things, I enjoy them as much as scoring goals.”

“WHERE ARE YOUR GOLDEN BOOTS?”

Bunny Shaw would be the first Manchester City player to top the WSL scoring chart...

2021-22	Sam Kerr (Chelsea, right)	**20**
2020-21	Sam Kerr (Chelsea)	**21**
2019-20	Vivianne Miedema (Arsenal)	**16**
2018-19	Vivianne Miedema (Arsenal)	**22**
2017-18	Ellen White (Birmingham)	**15**
Spring Series	Fran Kirby (Chelsea)	**6**
2016	Eni Aluko (Chelsea)	**9**
2015	Beth Mead (Sunderland)	**12**
2014	Karen Carney (Birmingham)	**8**
2013	Natasha Dowie (Liverpool)	**13**
2012	Kim Little (Arsenal)	**11**
2011	Rachel Williams (Birmingham)	**14**

LE TISSIER
15

"IT'S MY JOB TO BE IN THE RIGHT AREA AND STAY ALIVE FOR THE SCRUFFY BITS!"

Above Shaw will lead the line for the Reggae Girlz at the World Cup **Top** "See ya, I'm off to Nando's..."

Shaw's impressive individual campaign is setting her up well for what will be a second World Cup with Jamaica this summer. The Reggae Girlz made history back in 2019 when they became the first Caribbean country to qualify for the tournament, but it was a rude awakening for a nation that hadn't launched a regular women's football programme until a year earlier. Shaw was already the team's all-time leading goalscorer, surpassing the previous record of 23, but Jamaica finished bottom of a group containing Brazil, Italy and Australia, losing all of their matches, scoring only once and conceding 12.

"I was considered an experienced player in the Jamaican team at what, 22?" she says, thinking back to the competition which came a couple of months before her debut for Bordeaux. "A lot of my team-mates were still in high school and we only had one girl playing professionally – I was in college! We were off to a World Cup and I'd never played in front of such big crowds. Going there was like, 'What the hell?!'"

The Jamaica team has developed over the past few years – more players have gained professional experience, and the country's federation has focused on recruiting players from around the world. Brighton's Victoria Williams has since joined the squad, as have Spurs duo Drew Spence and Becky Spencer – all three were born in England.

"It's been great," enthuses Shaw. "That's something we've lacked over the past eight years because we've probably had 22 players locally from Jamaica, so everyone was doing the same thing. The difference of culture has helped us to widen the conversation."

Something that could hang over the 2023 World Cup is the number of entrants at odds with their federations - the Canadian national team threatened to strike recently due to a lack of resources, while 15 Spanish players have refused to play for their country while manager Jorge Vilda remains at the helm.

Jamaica are no strangers to similar issues. The national side went on strike shortly after the 2019 World Cup, having gone unpaid for nine months. "This ain't just about money, it's about change, change in the way women's football is viewed, especially in Jamaica," Shaw summarised on Instagram at the time.

Despite the barriers faced, Shaw is focused on her squad showing up at the tournament, where they will meet Brazil again, plus France and Panama. "It hasn't been great for the team how we've been treated, but we do what we can on the pitch," she says. "We're the underdogs, we always will be, but when you cross that white line, it's 11 versus 11."

After smashing an outrageous 56 goals in 38 international appearances, Shaw is an inspiration in Jamaica. She's fully aware she is a role model. "The younger girls back in the Caribbean, they don't have the opportunity," she says. "So for me to be here, I try to be as positive as I can. Some days can prove more difficult than others, but it's about staying positive and knowing I'm not doing this just for me. I'm doing it for the younger ones. I'm really enjoying my game, because you can only play for so long."

When there's a Nando's nearby, it's even easier for Shaw to enjoy life. "Can you believe that Filippa Angeldahl still hasn't tried it yet?" she laughs incredulously, referencing her Swedish club-mate, as the interview comes to a close and she bounds off with the same smile she's worn throughout.

In what has been a period of darkness for Manchester City's women's side, Bunny Shaw has provided the light. ○

SUGAR DADDY

Alan Sugar faced El Tel in court and angry fans in the stands during an eventful nine-year spell as Spurs chairman, which featured plenty of chances for him to hone his "You're fired!" catchphrase...

Words Richard Edwards

The afterglow of Tottenham Hotspur's most recent FA Cup triumph faded quickly. It was the summer of 1991, Spurs had captured football's oldest competition for a record eighth time, and yet the club was in a total mess.

Though a debt of £20 million seems piffling today, back in '91 it represented a crippling millstone around Tottenham's neck. Worse still, the financial lifeline due from selling Paul Gascoigne, with Lazio offering a world-record £8.5m fee, had just been jeopardised by Gazza injuring himself at Wembley with an extraordinarily bad tackle on Nottingham Forest's 21-year-old full-back Gary Charles, who ironically got to his feet immediately. Spurs needed money and fast.

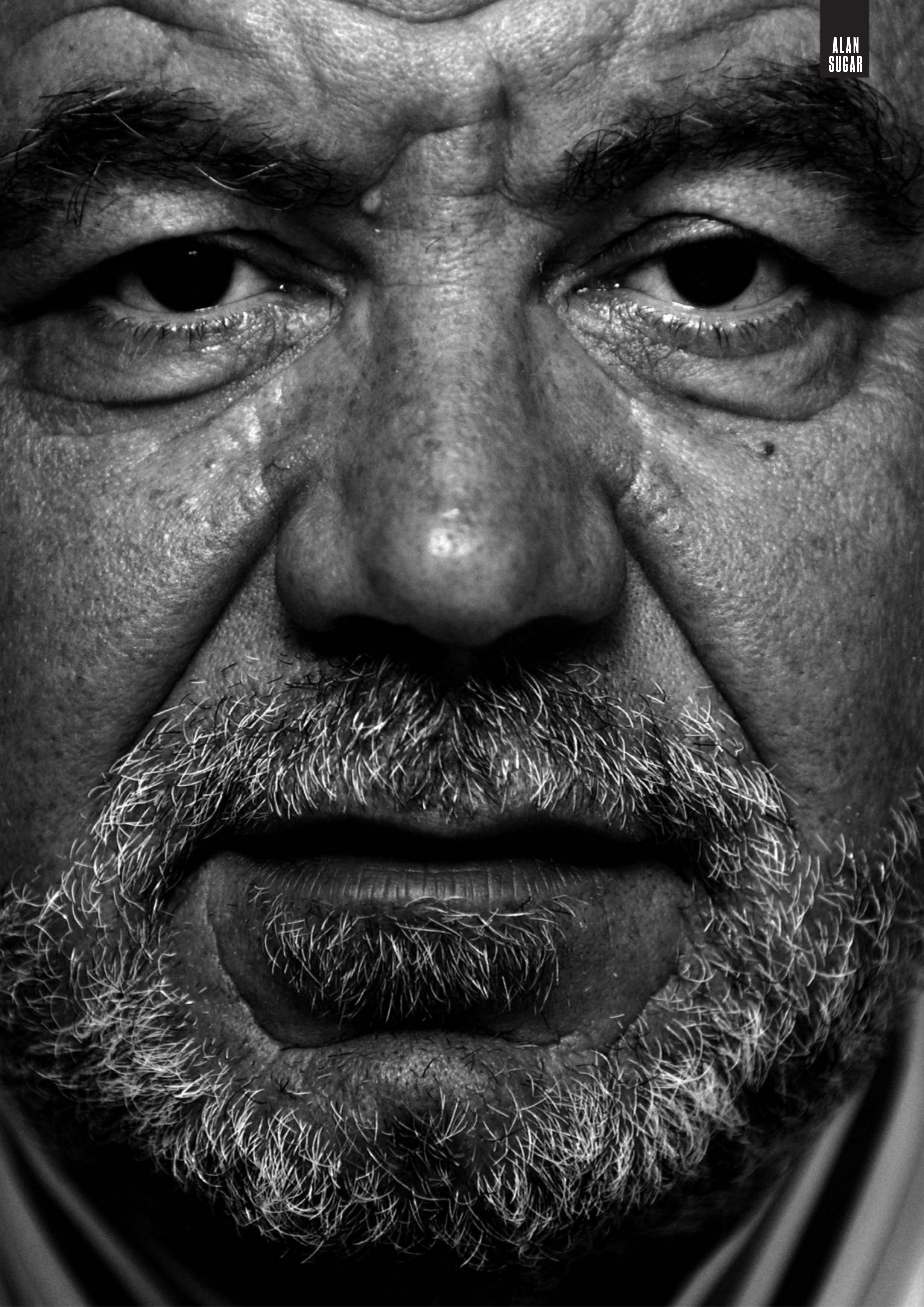
Their saviour was a former barrow boy from the East End. Alan Sugar had made a fortune with his electronics company Amstrad, and now he came to White Hart Lane to stabilise Spurs' parlous finances.

Terry Venables sat alongside Sugar in his opening press conference that June. The former Barcelona head honcho had just masterminded Tottenham to their record-breaking FA Cup final triumph over Brian Clough's Forest, but he found the boardroom even more alluring than the dugout and moved upstairs to become chief executive. In Sugar's words: "He'll look after the 11 players on the pitch; I'll look after the £11m in the bank." What could possibly go wrong?

"EVERY FIGURE HAD MINUS IN FRONT OF IT"

It's fitting that Sugar would later become best-known for *The Apprentice,* because when he walked through the doors at White Hart Lane 32 years ago, there wouldn't have been a better setting for a reality television show – specifically, on how not to run a football club.

Throughout the 1980s, the decade that created the yuppie, Spurs had blurred the boundaries between football and business. ▸



It was the first English club to fully embrace the sport's commercial opportunities, an attitude which prompted Keith Burkinshaw to swap north London for the Middle East in 1984. With that year's UEFA Cup under his belt and back-to-back FA Cup wins to start the decade, Burkinshaw was Spurs' most successful manager since Bill Nicholson, yet he left to manage Bahrain's national team lamenting, "Spurs have become a business rather than a football club."

The previous August, Tottenham had spent £100,000 on a promotional campaign, not long after announcing their intention to float the club on the stock exchange. During the months before Burkinshaw's shock exit, the UEFA Cup final his last game in charge, Spurs became the first football club in the world to sell match tickets on a credit card hotline. By 1991, this brave new world had morphed into a far more dangerous frontier.

"The club was on the verge of bankruptcy," says ex-Spurs goalkeeper Erik Thorstvedt. "I was doing some training at the gym at White Hart Lane and the club secretary was showing some potential investors around. The previous regime had miscalculated the cost of expanding the stands and also set up other companies under the Tottenham umbrella. I think there was a travel company, a women's fashion boutique – stuff like that. They were supposed to change the club's fortunes on the field, but they had done the complete opposite. Every figure had a minus in front of it."

Such dreadful business decisions wouldn't have looked out of place on *The Apprentice*, and the cast Sugar brought in alongside him would also be recognisable to BBC viewers a generation later. Nick Hewer, who would be a mainstay of the programme for 10 years before ditching the boardroom for the comfy *Countdown* studio, and fellow familiar face Claude Littner each played a role in one of the most entertaining, if ultimately unfulfilling, periods in Tottenham's history.

"He has known Mr Venables on and off over the years and, although I wouldn't say they're great pals, they have a mutual respect for each other's achievements," Hewer told *The Daily Telegraph* ahead of Sugar's takeover being finalised. It wasn't exactly a ringing endorsement, but with Spurs in a deep hole, chairman Irving Scholar had precious few avenues left to explore.

Sugar bought the club while Robert Maxwell – the former MP, media tycoon, fraudster and inspiration for a Bond villain, Elliot Carver in *Tomorrow Never Dies* – circled. However, Cap'n Bob's involvement with both Oxford United and Derby County made any takeover difficult, if not impossible.

Below "This is my gaff now" **Bottom** Sugar and El Tel didn't see eye to eye

RECEPTION
TOTTENHAM HOTSPUR
FOOTBALL CLUB

For Sugar and Venables, the plan was to buy a share stake which would provide the basis for a full-scale takeover of the club. Shares in Tottenham had been suspended the previous October. "Their main target is the 37 per cent stake held by Mr Paul Bobroff, ex-chairman of the Spurs holding company, and Mr Irving Scholar, the club chairman," wrote *The Daily Telegraph*'s business editor.

It was a successful ploy. Soon, Sugar had the keys to the palace – or at least a ground that had seen far better days and an FA Cup-winning team that was about to split up.

THE START OF A NEW ERA

Central to Spurs' financial future was selling the one player capable of bringing the new regime any silverware. Gascoigne had arrived at the Lane in 1988, when he was just 21, for £2.2m – a huge sum 35 years ago. "I believe Spurs are ready to win things, and obviously it's the title they'll be after," he declared after signing a five-year deal – a bold statement, given they hadn't threatened to do so since winning the Double in 1961.

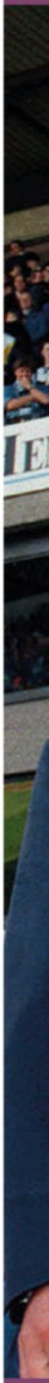
Three years later, the title couldn't have been further from the thoughts of the club's new hierarchy. Tottenham had just finished 10th, 34 points behind their league-winning rivals Arsenal, and their star was off. For the incoming owners, Lazio's hefty bid assumed even heftier financial significance.

The fly in the ointment was the cruciate ligament Gascoigne had ruptured thanks to his moment of madness against Forest at Wembley. In fact, it was two moments: the pumped-up midfielder had already stuck his studs into Garry Parker's chest, 43 seconds into the FA Cup final. He could have done with team-mate Gary Lineker repeating his previous summer's temple-tapping 'have a word with him' advice to his boss; instead, Gazza received a gentle chiding from the smiling referee and annihilated Gary Charles 15 minutes later. Forced off on a stretcher before he could target Gary Crosby for the hat-trick, Gascoigne went unpunished by the referee but not by karma. He was injured for the entire 1991-92 campaign.

After the 24-year-old's recovery was held up by the physical ramifications of a nightclub incident, Lazio gave him until May 31, 1992 to prove his fitness. Otherwise, the deal was dead. Benfica eagerly waited in the wings. Ever the optimist, chief executive Venables insisted the club would survive even if the deadline were missed. It was touch and go but eventually Gazza did move to Lazio – for a reduced fee of £5.5m.

Walking into the mayhem was Darren Anderton, the Portsmouth winger signed by Spurs after the 1991-92 season. Now living in Florida, he has watched Lord Sugar's TV fame from afar.

"I haven't seen him for a couple of years, but watching the show I think, 'Yeah, he's pretty much playing himself!'," the former England man laughs to *FFT*. "I had a lot of dealings with him, as I stayed throughout his time at Spurs and didn't end up going to Manchester United [in 1995].



“He gave me a pretty good contract and then I got the injuries. He was so frustrated by that, and probably by the fact that Spurs was the only thing he hadn’t been successful at, because he wanted it so much.”

If Sugar had taken the helm at Tottenham during a perfect storm in 1991, then by 1992 the headwinds battering Spurs were nearing hurricane force. Managed by the returning Peter Shreeves – appointed by Venables as his successor – they took 16 points from the opening seven games of the Sugar era, with Lineker scoring 11 goals in that period, but somehow still contrived to finish 15th in the final First Division table. That summer, Gazza went to Italy, Lineker to Japan, and Shreeves to the Job Centre.

But Sugar was about to benefit from one of the biggest breaks imaginable. As plans for the Premier League unfolded, he managed to secure himself a crucial role in shaping the future of football.

“THE WHOLE THING WAS A BIT HAPHAZARD”

Remarkable as it sounds for a league that attracted broadcast rights of £4.8bn in May 2021, there was uncertainty whether the Premier League would be a huge success or costly failure. As late as December 1991, Gordon McKeag – a Newcastle director and chairman of the Football League’s six-man steering group – commented, “It’s little short of a disgrace that things have been mooted for so long and no decisions taken.

“I’d be happy to talk about restructuring a Football League that still retains the present First Division clubs.”

Sugar had been a key figure in the growth of Rupert Murdoch’s Sky empire, having bagged the contract to provide the satellite dishes. For the Hackney-born entrepreneur, it was the extension of an empire that had begun with a business manufacturing and distributing hi-fi equipment. Amstrad (Alan Michael Sugar Trading) was publicly listed in 1980, and by 1986 was producing one of the world’s first low-cost PCs, revolutionising the technology market in Europe. In 1988, the company turned a profit of £150m and was valued at £1.2bn on the stock exchange.

When Murdoch came knocking to talk Sky dishes, with details of a potential agreement supposedly scribbled on a napkin over lunch, life could not have been sweeter for Sugar. *The Guardian* reported in February 1991 that satellite dishes made up 28 per cent of Amstrad’s sales.

Meanwhile, the wrangling over English football’s future continued. Although Sugar explained his potential conflict of interest, as a club owner who also supplied the satellite dishes to the firm aiming to win exclusive TV rights to the new first division, those charged

AS PLANS FOR THE NEW PREMIER LEAGUE UNFOLDED, SUGAR SECURED HIMSELF A KEY ROLE IN SHAPING THE FUTURE OF FOOTBALL

Below The cup-winning team soon disbanded, as Lineker went to Japan and Gazza to Italy

STRAD
2-45
MA
BAR
E'S NO MIS
G...
STEN
T.H.F.C.

Amstrad
e-mailer

WE WANT
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NO
SUGAR

Top to bottom Sugar made his name selling electronic gear; Murdoch's Sky changed the game, aided by Amstrad; open Spurs warfare with Mrs Razor

with deciding the breakaway Premier League agreed that he could vote.

With ITV set to win the bid, Sugar famously called Sky from the clubs' meeting at a hotel lobby and told them to "blow them out of the water". Sky promptly blew ITV out of the water and the Premier League was given the go-ahead. By a single vote.

The rest, of course, is history. Sky's losses in 1992 were £47m. A year later, the company turned a profit of £62m. As riches poured into football, the finances of the clubs, owners, agents and players involved also changed beyond all recognition.

As that money tap was turned on, Sugar's trusted confidantes faced the thankless task of trying to instil a dose of professionalism at White Hart Lane.

"I'd spent a couple of seasons in Germany and there was a lot more emphasis on how you should live as a player; what you ate and drank," recalls Thorstvedt. "In England, that was very different. The clubs were organised differently, too. There were maybe seven or eight people involved in running Borussia Monchengladbach, but at Tottenham there were loads of people everywhere! The whole thing was a bit haphazard.

"Alan Sugar was slightly shocked when he came in, as he was a proper businessman. That's where things slowly started to unravel between him and Terry Venables."

Rumours were spreading that if staff in administrative positions made a phone call from the White Hart Lane landline that was likely to cost more than a pound, they needed to get permission from the boss. At the same time, Sugar claimed Venables was bringing in new players without consulting him – nor the balance sheet.

By the summer of 1993, the pair were engaging in open warfare that would end in court, watched in the public gallery by vocal Spurs fans. Venables laid bare all the issues.

"I told Sugar early on that he stood little chance of making much money out of Spurs for a long time," explained the outgoing soon-to-be England manager. "We had to spend money to sign players. He told me to bugger off." If only *The Apprentice*'s producers had chosen that as the main catchphrase instead of, "You're fired."

Nor did bosses survive for very long under Sugar. Shreeves lasted a single season, while Ray Clemence and Doug Livermore arrived as joint-managers and were shown the door just a year later. Then in the summer of 1993, Ossie Ardiles came home.

OSSIE'S DREAM BECOMES A NIGHTMARE

Ardiles had been a Spurs legend as a player, joining in the wake of Argentina's 1978 World Cup triumph and going on to wow fans for a decade. His return as manager was popular, helping him to escape the sack even when his side lost seven consecutive league games at the turn of the year, then finished 15th. Going into the following season, after USA 94, Sugar bought Ardiles a constellation of World Cup stars.

"It finally looked as though we were going places," Anderton tells *FFT*. "He got Jurgen Klinsmann in, [Ilie] Dumitrescu and [Gica] Popescu – suddenly we were the team that everybody wanted to watch. We started the trend of getting the best foreign players to come to the Premier League."

Playing a formation that seemed as if it were conceived on the playground, Ardiles' Spurs attacked, attacked, attacked. And then attacked some more. They began the season with a bang, kicking off with a 4-3 win over Sheffield Wednesday at Hillsborough – the first of three wins in their first four matches, only losing narrowly to Manchester United. Klinsmann scored 10 times in his first seven appearances, while a 6-3 goalfest won away at Watford in the League Cup only added to the new-found glamour of the 'Fab Five': Klinsmann, Dumitrescu, Anderton, Nicky Barmby and Teddy Sheringham. The football was glamorous, anyway.

But predictably, it didn't take too long for this gung-ho approach to misfire, then self-destruct. After a 5-2 October capitulation at Manchester City's Maine Road was followed four days later by a humbling 3-0 cup defeat to Notts County, who would finish bottom of the second tier that season, Ardiles received the two-word message heard by numerous *Apprentice* candidates.

The appointment of Gerry Francis heralded an immediate improvement in both solidity and results – Spurs' points tally under him was second only to Manchester United for the rest of the campaign – but any hopes of Sugar's reign bringing long-term success were dashed by a mass exodus.

It was led by Klinsmann. The forward had signed a one-year deal at Tottenham with a two-year option, but returned to Germany after the first to join Bayern Munich. Sugar was livid. The Spurs chairman – who coined the phrase 'Carlos Kickaball' to describe the stereotypical foreign mercenary he perceived as clogging up Premier League teams' squads – appeared on GMTV and threw Klinsmann's shirt away, saying he wouldn't even use it to clean his car.

"Jurgen stayed for a year, Popescu stayed for a year, Nicky Barmby left and I picked up the injuries," recalls Anderton, reflecting on Ardiles' reign. "He was really unlucky. If that side had stayed together, then who knows?"

THE MAN WHO SHOT BAMBI

Yet Sugar's finest achievement during that period came off the pitch. In May 1994, the FA charged Spurs with misconduct relating

SUPPORTERS HAD TAKEN VENABLES' SIDE IN THE CLUB'S UNCIVIL WAR, SOME EVEN STAGING PROTESTS AT SUGAR'S HOUSE

to irregular payments to players in the '80s, predating his arrival. The punishment was stunning: a £600,000 fine, 12-point deduction in the Premier League and one-year ban from competing in the FA Cup.

There was no danger of Sugar taking it lying down. Saying he viewed the FA's treatment as "a deliberate vendetta against our club and against me personally", he got to work. An initial appeal saw the points deduction reduced to just six, but the fine increased to £1.5m and the FA Cup suspension remaining in place. Another appeal, this time heard by an independent arbiter, scrapped the points ban entirely and allowed Tottenham to enter the FA Cup after all.

Peterborough and Swindon had previously recorded similar misdemeanours and been relegated. Sugar had surged into battle and won, and the fans loved it.

Whether the fans loved him was another matter. Only the previous year, supporters had – along with a number of players – taken Venables' side in the club's uncivil war. Some, including centre-back Neil Ruddock's then-wife Sarah, even staged protests outside the owner's house, leading Sugar to quip in May 1993 that he "felt like the man who'd shot Bambi". His mother, Alan. You felt like you'd shot Bambi's *mother*. He would later leave the Lilywhites faithful aghast when he did the unthinkable and hired Arsenal legend George Graham as manager.

Below Sugar brought Ossie to Tottenham, but the gung-ho approach didn't last long

HOLSTEN
HOLSTEN

Sugar always did things his own way, and if he was outspoken when he arrived at White Hart Lane, then as 1997 rolled around he had even less interest in keeping the peace. In a speech to the Oxford Union in October of that year, he made no attempt to conceal his contempt for the governance of the sport.

"The FA is like Madame Tussauds," he said. "Whenever they come to our place, we tell them to keep walking so we can distinguish between them and the waxworks. They are totally out of their depth. They haven't a clue – none of them."

Was he finished? Was he heck.

"What we really need is reform at that level. They are totally out to lunch. The way the FA is run, it takes about 900 people to decide whether to change referees' shirts from green to brown. I'm not kidding."

Closer to home, however, there was disquiet in the Spurs dressing room.

"When I'd been out injured for about three months, he asked me to sit on the bench, to give the crowd a lift," remembers Anderton. "I needed to be held back, but he said that if I gave the crowd a lift, I wouldn't be required anyway. We were 3-0 up at half-time and he came in smiling as if to say, 'Look at me; look what I've done'. Then, with 10 minutes to go, it was 3-2 and Gerry Francis brought me on. I was scared s**tless to use my right foot."

Sheringham's patience also snapped when Claude Littner ventured in post-match. "He came in and said, "Unlucky, guys" and Teddy lost his mind," explains Anderton. "He said, 'Unlucky?! How about you sort that f**king pitch out, so we can play?' To be fair, the pitch was a sandpit. Poor old Claude didn't really know what to say."

As results continued to nosedive, Francis lost his job and was replaced by Christian Gross, the Swiss gaffer who famously turned up to his first press conference brandishing a Travelcard to highlight his admiration for London. Deeply unpopular with Tottenham's players, he would last just nine months before Graham was, to the fans' horror, brought in to engineer an upturn in the club's fortunes.

Under Graham's guidance, Spurs did lift their only silverware in Sugar's reign, winning the 1999 League Cup Final against Leicester thanks to Allan Nielsen's injury-time header. As Christmas 2000 neared, Sugar sold his controlling stake in the club, receiving £22m from ENIC and Daniel Levy for 27 per cent of his shares. It wasn't until June 2007, and the month before he sold Amstrad to BSkyB for £125m, that he flogged the remainder of his 14.6 per cent stake in Tottenham Hotspur for £25m, taking the total profit from his initial investment in the club to £39m.

Venables was right all along: it would take Sugar a long time to make much money out of Spurs. For Tottenham supporters' dreams of a first FA Cup triumph since May 1991, the month prior to Sugar's arrival at the club, the wait has been longer still. ●

AROUND THE GROUNDS

EFL • NON-LEAGUE • SCOTLAND

INTERVIEW

KEVIN PHILLIPS

The South Shields gaffer discusses the scarcity of great strike partnerships, Golden Boot glory and Euro 2000 heartbreak

Interview Ed McCambridge

You took charge of Northern Premier League side South Shields in January 2022, with the club in third and big expectations to go up. That's a lot of pressure for a first managerial role...
Pressure comes with managing a team with great crowds, good infrastructure and investment – that's what most managers want. My goal is to get this side promoted. We made the 2021-22 play-offs but didn't quite have enough to go up. Luckily, my chairman backed me to lead the club through a transfer window and judge me on my first full season. I know this job is a big gamble as, if you don't succeed in the seventh tier, further opportunities aren't likely to be thrown at you.

South Shields have been absolutely flying this season, topping the table. What's been the key to that success?
We brought in the right players in the summer. Being full-time also gives us a decent advantage over some of the division's other sides, as we can fully focus on fitness levels and preparing for matches. As an ex-pro, getting to bring that sort of professionalism to this league has been crucial.

Beyond promotion this term, what's the aim for South Shields?
There was a long-term plan from the owner that was sold to me when I first arrived. Looking at the facilities here, the infrastructure, the crowds – we're getting around 2,500 at every home game, which is phenomenal – we need to be aiming for the Football League in the years to come. But that's not all down to me, it will take a team effort. The job isn't done this season.

You've served on the coaching staff at various EFL clubs in the past. How much did those experiences help?
It was massive for me. I learnt a lot at Stoke from Gary Rowett, who speaks to his players with so much clarity. Paul Clement at Derby, too – he's worked with some of the biggest players in the world. They gave me an insight into what it takes to be a football manager.

You were on the Leicester City staff until partway through the season they won the Premier League title in 2015-16. What made you leave?
We'd stayed up by the skin of our teeth but then Nigel Pearson left, Claudio Ranieri came in and you're thinking we just need to survive again. Some of the signings we made that summer were excellent and we made such a strong start. Jamie Vardy was scoring every week. Listen, if I knew they were going to go on and win the Premier League that season, I wouldn't have left in the September. But a good opportunity came up for me at Derby and I took it.

> "IF I FOUND ANOTHER PHILLIPS-QUINN DOUBLE ACT AS A MANAGER, IT'D BE HARD TO LOOK PAST"

You scored a ludicrous number of goals in your playing days, but never got a move to a top-four club. Why?
[*Laughs*] You tell me! I was very close to signing for Arsenal at one point, but that didn't work out and I'm not aware of any other approaches. Looking back at that era, there were some fantastic strikers around, so perhaps that was a reason. I'm not saying I wasn't happy where I was, but to have had a chance to play at one of those top-four teams in the Premier League would have been amazing. Especially Arsenal, because I'm an Arsenal fan.

Your goals helped to fire Sunderland out of the second tier in 1998-99 and earned you an England cap – what was it like first teaming up with that squad of superstars?
It was nerve-racking, but so exciting at the same time. I couldn't wait to get down there to meet all the lads. When I arrived, Kevin Keegan met me at the reception, made me feel very welcome and I joined the boys for dinner. Back

then, there were a lot of cliques in the squad, so the Arsenal, Liverpool and Manchester United lads were spread out on their own tables. It didn't really matter to me! I'd been playing in the equivalent of the Championship, so it was surreal sitting there among loads of Premier League players.

Your 30 Premier League goals won you the Golden Boot and European Golden Shoe in 1999-00. How proud are you of those achievements?
It was incredible. As a striker you want to score as many goals as possible, but to top the Premier League chart in that era especially, and also be the number one in Europe with outstanding players across the continent, was a massive achievement. You have to remember, and no disrespect to Sunderland here, but I managed it in a team that wasn't expected to score many goals. I have both of those Golden Boots in my loft now. I should probably get them up on the mantelpiece.

You made Kevin Keegan's Euro 2000 England squad but didn't play. What are your memories of that summer?
Mixed emotions, really. To not even get out of the group stage was extremely disappointing. And on a personal level, coming straight off the back of winning the Premier League Golden Boot and European Golden Shoe and then not being given a single minute of action on the pitch during the games – games in which we desperately needed goals, may I add – was especially frustrating. When I got named in the squad it was a dream come true, though ultimately I was disappointed with it.

South Shields are among the highest scorers in the division. How much of your striking wisdom do you impart?
If a striker comes up to me and wants to ask my opinion about where he can improve his finishing, I'll give him it. As a player, I was forthcoming – I'd speak to my coaches and spend hours on the training ground, staying late, working on my finishing. That drive has to come from them, but I'm available whenever they need me.

You were part of an iconic big-man-little-man strike partnership with Niall Quinn at Sunderland. Is that a tactic you employ as a manager?
[*Laughs*] I haven't ventured down that route just yet, but it's something that I wouldn't rule out. First, you've got to find the right types of players to use a system like that. Right now I feel my players are better suited to a 4-2-3-1 setup, with a mobile No.9 and dribbler who can play in behind him. If I could find another Kevin Phillips and Niall Quinn, though, it'd be hard to look past another double act.

LEAGUE ONE NEWS

ROAD TO RECOVERY

Kevin McDonald required a life-saving kidney transplant from his brother in 2021 after a long-term condition worsened. The Exeter midfielder loves being back...

For most footballers, career-ending afflictions tend to be related to knees, ankles, ligaments or tendons. However, in the case of Scotland international Kevin McDonald, it was a kidney that nearly killed him off. Quite literally.

"I was 18 when initially diagnosed with a degenerative kidney disease," McDonald recalls to *FFT* now. "Burnley had agreed to sign me from Dundee; I went down to do a medical and the results came as a shock to everyone."

The midfielder got his move, but would need to spend the rest of his career on various forms of medication. Despite early concerns, he proved a fan favourite at clubs including the Clarets, Wolves and Fulham, winning five Scotland caps.

"By the time I turned 32 I'd had a great career, was still enjoying my football – then everything changed," says McDonald. "A routine blood test at Fulham came back saying things had dangerously deteriorated."

Unbeknown to McDonald, he had long been functioning with just one kidney, which was now only working at 10 per cent capacity. He required an urgent transplant if he was to live. Luckily, brother Fraser donated one of his kidneys in May 2021.

"You can never truly thank a person for that kind of sacrifice – I'm forever grateful to my brother and my whole family for their support," he says.

McDonald's body initially rejected the donated kidney, with the then-Cottager rapidly shedding weight. In a critical condition, he steadily recovered. At this stage, McDonald would have been forgiven for hanging up his boots – yet he had other ideas.

> "MY RETURN STARTED WITH A FEW STEPS IN HOSPITAL, BUT THEY LEFT ME EXHAUSTED"

"My return started by taking a few steps in my hospital room, which left me exhausted," he continues. "Then I began to build up my fitness doing walking and jogging. I progressed to training alone in the gym, then joined in Fulham youth-team sessions and played for the under-23s."

McDonald not only got fit again, but found he could run with more ease than he had in a long time, thanks to the vast improvement in his overall physicality. "I soon felt ready to start playing properly," he explains. "But my contract was up at Fulham and, sadly, clubs weren't exactly throwing themselves at me."

McDonald eventually persuaded Dundee United, close to hometown Carnoustie in Scotland, to give him a short-term deal. After six months without a club, he resumed his career in English football at League One Exeter this January.

"I'm massively grateful," beams the 34-year-old. "To Dundee United as well, for their gamble, and Fulham, who've always insisted I'm welcome back to train and use their facilities."

McDonald scored his first goal for the Grecians in a 2-0 February defeat of Cambridge – "an incredible feeling after everything," he concedes.

"I've been in football all my life," reflects McDonald, whose wife gave birth to their second child the week before his Cambridge strike. "I love being in the dressing room and still feel I contribute – I wouldn't be here if not. I'm so grateful to be healthy, doing what I love and supporting my wife and family after everything they've been through. It's fantastic to be back – life's a blessing."

BEST & WORST

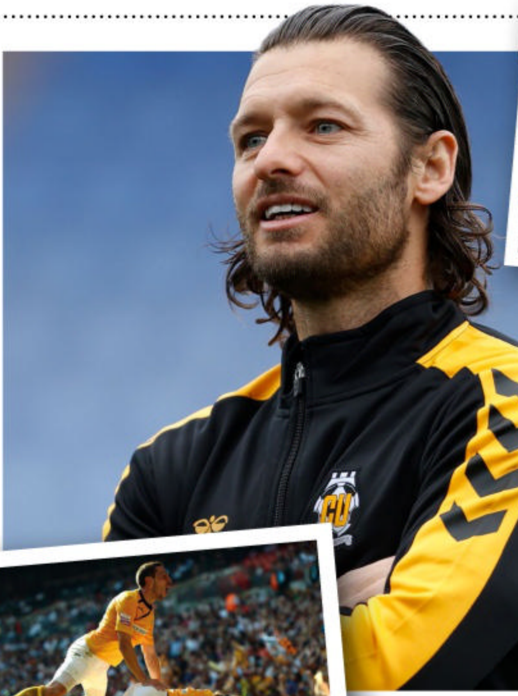
CAMBRIDGE UNITED

Under the Abbey Stand's **Owen Kiernan** and **Jordan Worland** on the Irish Messi, Beckball and Perez's perm...

XI

BEST: Lionel Perez, Kyle Knoyle, Josh Coulson, Andy Duncan, Clive Wilson, Paul Wanless, Luke Chadwick, Wes Hoolahan, Alex Russell, John Taylor, Dave Kitson.

WORST: David Forde, Stuart Bimson, Jordan Jones, John Dreyer, David Chick, Paul Raynor, Justin Walker, Richard Prokas, Kingsley Mbome, Danny Webb, Jonas Axeldal.



PLAYER

B: The Irish Messi, Wes Hoolahan [right]. Undoubtedly the finest player ever to pull on the amber and black.

W: Sully Seychelles was going to fire us to glory in 2004-05, but got injured in his one game for us and we wound up relegated.

MOMENT

B: The final whistle in the 2014 Conference Play-off Final [right], after 10 nerve-racking minutes of injury time with the U's a man down. Nine long years in the non-league wilderness were over.

W: A 0-0 draw against Rochdale in 2005 that confirmed our EFL relegation. Soon in administration, we only avoided liquidation thanks to a miracle from MP Richard Caborn.

GAME

B: Newcastle away in the FA Cup last season – little old Cambridge against the world's richest club. We sold out the away end, and the nouveau-riche Magpies sold out the rest.

W: Getting thrashed 5-0 in December 2006 at Histon, a local village side, who in our darkest Conference days found themselves in the same division as us.

OWNER

B: Paul Barry's children must hate how much of their inheritance he's blown on the club he loves.

W: Gary Harwood sold Dave Kitson for pennies and the stadium for even less.

SIGNING

B: John Taylor both times. Under John Beck he formed a formidable duo with Dion Dublin as we rose up the leagues from the late 1980s, and he returned older and wiser under Roy McFarland to fire us to promotion again in 1999.

W: Daryl Clare, for his 'experience', ahead of Conor Washington in 2010. Played 20 games, scored only once.

CULT HERO

B: 'King of the Abbey' Paul Wanless [below]. Luke Chadwick also deserves a big shout for leaving MK Dons for us.

W: "Terry Fleming's magic, he's got a golden tooth, he went out on the piss and now he's training with the youth."

CHANT

B: "Cheer up Barry Fry." Baz is far from popular in this part of Cambridgeshire, but has given us many laughs over the years.

W: "XXX's a s**thole, I want to go home." We're lucky to play in a pretty nice city, but let's not forget that the Abbey is in the poorest area of Cambridge and there's plenty of poverty on our own doorstep, too.

MANAGER

B: John Beck [above] in the early '90s. He took us up the leagues with a unique style of long-ball football and brought innovation to the British game before Arsene Wenger.

W: Beck in the early 2000s, still trying the same tactics 12 years later. Painful to watch and a horrible atmosphere.

HAIRCUT

B: Lionel Perez's majestic blonde perm.

W: Tony Richards' blue rinse. Not sure what possessed him to turn up with blue hair one day, but it was the '90s so anything went.

AWAY TRIP

B: Leyton Orient are just half an hour down the M11 (if you believe former boss Tommy Taylor) and have loads of decent pubs nearby.

W: MK Dons have a soulless stadium and team. Also, we never win there.

OPPONENT

B: Ipswich always treat our matches against them as a cup final.

W: Also Ipswich and their easily triggered supporters.

HARD MAN

B: Wanless would run through brick walls for us, and often did.

W: Robbie Turner was that bad, U's fans actually chanted for him to get sent off once.

BOY'S A BIT SPECIAL

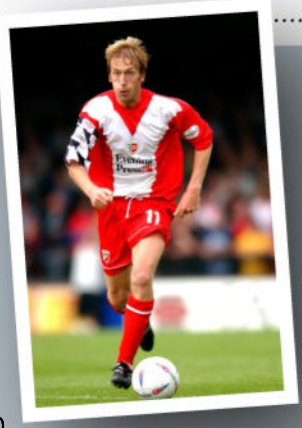
32Red
SET YOUR LIMITS

MALIK TILLMAN

RANGERS (ON LOAN FROM BAYERN)

THE LOWDOWN Born in Nuremberg to a German mother and American father, Tillman joined Bayern Munich aged 13 and earned a senior debut in August 2021. The graceful 20-year-old attacking midfielder moved to Rangers on loan last July, just after switching his allegiance to the USA. **HIGHLIGHT** Two Ibrox headers in the space of four days last August: one against Royale Union Saint-Gilloise in Champions League qualifying, the second in beating St Johnstone 4-0. **DID YOU KNOW?** Tillman sparked controversy in Rangers' 3-2 Scottish Cup victory over Partick Thistle. After pinching the ball from Jags skipper Kevin Holt, who was returning it to the Gers after Tillman had received treatment, the midfielder ran through to score. Cue Ibrox fisticuffs before gaffer Michael Beale made his team let the second-tier Jags net. Phew. **WHAT'S NEXT?** Securing his USMNT spot ahead of the home 2026 World Cup. Rangers have a £5 million first option to buy in the summer – useful following nine goals and five assists by March. His next meeting with Holt could also be a sight for sore eyes...

KIT CRIMES | YORK CITY, 2002-03, HOME



Little known fact: the 'Y' on the front here stands not for 'York', but 'Y have they done that?' The Minstermen (featuring Graham Potter) donned this heinous get-up for their 80th season, stitching a chequered flag onto one sleeve in honour of their chairman, racing driver and team boss John Batchelor. It's not a trendsetter – and wouldn't look out of place riding a filly at the racecourse. Y, oh Y indeed, York.

THE UNLIKELY LADS

JEAN-JACQUES EYDELIE

WALSALL (1998)

CREDENTIALS Midfield anchor Eydelie had bagged a Ligue 1 and Champions League double in his debut campaign at Marseille in 1992-93. FIFA sharply banned him for a year, with another 12 months suspended, after he was found guilty of bribing three Valenciennes opponents to "go easy" in their fixture three days before the Milan final. He even served 17 days in jail for the misdemeanor. Five years later, though, the then 32-year-old joined Walsall, in the third-tier of English football, on loan from Sion.

HOW'D IT GO? Debuting in a 2-1 March win against eventual league champions Watford – alongside compatriot Didier Tholot, who had played in the 1996 UEFA Cup Final for Bordeaux – Eydelie impressed in Walsall's bid to avoid relegation. Former Saddlers defender Chris Marsh described the water-carrier as "absolutely sensational – we all looked at him and said, 'What the hell are you doing here?'". Opinions would soon change when Eydelie sparked a mass changing-room brawl after one defeat, by refusing to run midway through the game.

THEN WHAT? The Frenchman's nomadic career continued at clubs as glamorous as FC Zurich, US Avranches and Stade Beaucairois before finally retiring in 2003. He released an autobiography three years later, detailing corruption and doping during his time with Marseille. Ex-chairman Bernard Tapie sued unsuccessfully for libel.

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THE GAME'S GONE

WIGAN 8-0 HULL, 2020

Nobody saw this annihilation coming – and nobody saw it in the ground, either

"We just didn't get going at all," was how Hull manager Grant McCann ever-so-slightly underplayed it at full-time, having seen his team ship seven first-half goals to Wigan. "We stood there at the sideline, thinking, 'Is it going to stop?'"

KINGDOM
DW Fitness First
WIGAN ATHLETIC 8
HULL CITY 0
90:00 7:49

Both clubs were relegated from the Championship two games after this demolition – but while an on-field capitulation was to blame for Hull's demotion, Wigan's demise had more to do with balance sheets than clean sheets.

Five days prior to Hull's visit, Wigan had been pummelled by a 12-point deduction from the Football League, the result of entering administration following financial mismanagement and the effects of COVID-19. The punishment suddenly left the 2013 FA Cup winners fighting for survival.

Hull's was a drawn-out implosion, but just as painful. Ninth in the table on New Year's Day, the Tigers forgot the '2020' aspect of the 2019-2020 campaign. Selling Jarrod Bowen and Kamil Grosicki to Wests Ham and Bromwich Albion respectively (well, why not, in their position?), they then won one more match after the first week of January, amassing six points from their final 20 fixtures. Prayers that the COVID-hit season would be null-and-voided fell on deaf ears.

At least lockdown meant Hull fans couldn't make the trip. Kal Naismith opened the scoring in the very first minute, Wigan dominated and in the latter half of the opening period came the most devastating 20 minutes the Championship has ever seen. Kieffer Moore scored. Kieran Dowell scored. Then it was Jamal Lowe, Moore again and Dowell again, before Joe Williams made it 7-0 at the break. Naismith hit the post in that spell, too. And every time, the same haunting goal music for Hull: *This Girl* by Kungs vs Cookin' on 3 Burners (look it up – you know it).

There was very little celebrating; just cold, calculated finishing, as if Wigan were in a hurry to wrap up the season. The bloodbath recalled Germany's 7-1 mauling of Brazil in 2014, but with the DW Stadium replacing the Maracana. Wigan, like Germany, went easy in the second half; Dowell completed his hat-trick, though, netting Wigan's eighth from their ninth shot on target as sofa-bound fans of each team squinted at the table, trying to see if goal difference could be a pivotal factor in their campaign.

"We're proud of our supporters and the town, raising money and giving us their support, and I think tonight we've gone quite a long way towards repaying that," said Wigan boss Paul Cook after the thrashing, which, but for the deduction, would have thrust them to 13th, closer to the play-offs than the drop zone.

Sadly, not even a club-record win mattered in the end: Wigan fell into League One on the final day along with rock-bottom Hull. No prizes for guessing which of the sides actually posted a positive goal difference that season and whose was a dismal –30.

CLAIMS TO FAME

KILMARNOCK

1 CURSE OF THE CUP

Killie played in the first official Scottish Cup match, losing 2-0 to the now-defunct Renton in 1873. Despite having played in each of its 150 seasons, they've won the cup just thrice: in 1920, 1929 and 1997.

2 GOING STATESIDE

Kilmarnock topped their group ahead of Bayern Munich, Burnley, Nice, Glenavon and, er, 'New York Americans' in the inaugural 1960 season of the International Soccer League, the USA's short-lived punt at a pseudo-Intercontinental Cup which launched in the same year as… the Intercontinental Cup. Alas, Killie lost the New York showpiece to Bangu, who now play in Brazil's fourth tier. The match highlights are online if you don't believe us.

3 FINE MARGINS

In one of football's closest title races, Kilmarnock went to Hearts on the final day of the 1964-65 Scottish top-flight season needing to win by two goals. And indeed they did, their 2-0 victory putting Killie just 0.042 ahead of Hearts on goal average. Goal difference was eventually introduced in 1971-72.

4 TWO-HORSE RACE

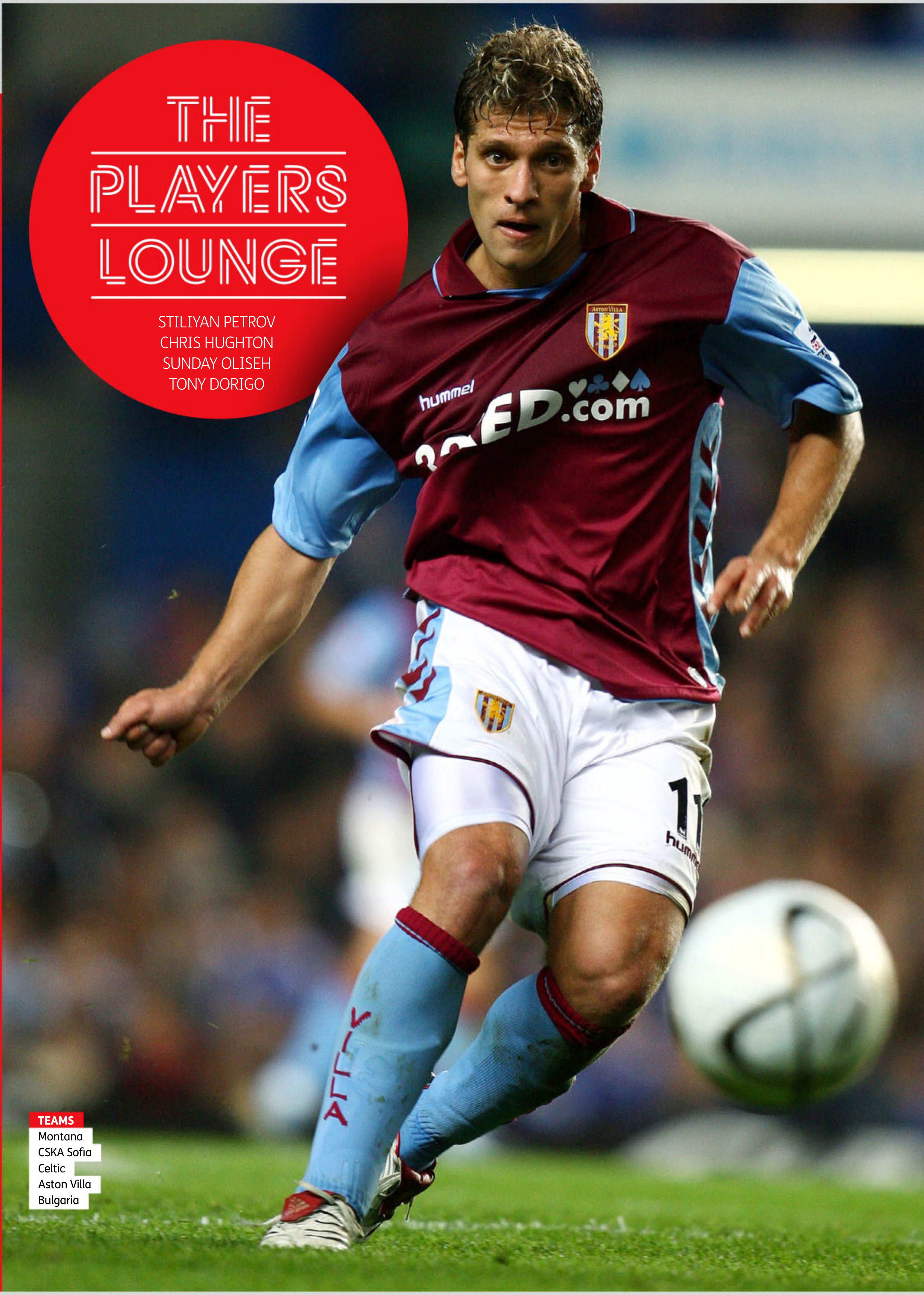
Founded back in 1877 and disbanded some 121 years later, the Ayrshire Cup featured more than 40 participating sides across Scotland during its peak. Between 1946 and 1977, however, Killie and Ayr United were the only two teams in it. As a result, Kilmarnock totalled 43 triumphs, making them one of the most successful outfits in Scottish football history, sort of.

5 PAPER ROSES

Kilmarnock supporters have adopted as their own club anthem the country ballad *Paper Roses*, most notably recorded by Marie Osmond (sister of Donny). After taking her version to No.1 on the US country chart, Marie rocked up at Rugby Park in February 2013 and surprised locals with a live performance of the popular ditty.

THE PLAYERS LOUNGE

STILIYAN PETROV
CHRIS HUGHTON
SUNDAY OLISEH
TONY DORIGO



TEAMS
Montana
CSKA Sofia
Celtic
Aston Villa
Bulgaria

STILIYAN PETROV

"AT THE START, IT WAS JUST A COLD. IT NEVER CROSSED MY MIND THAT IT COULD BE CANCER"

The Bulgarian powerhouse takes *FFT* on a journey from Celtic's winners to Villa's nearly men, his leukaemia and recovery

Interview Sean Cole

How did your 1999 move from CSKA Sofia to Celtic, when you were 20, come about?
At the end of the season with CSKA, I played really well in an international match against England which we [Bulgaria] drew 1-1. Celtic enquired about me and the negotiations went very quickly. My phone wasn't working, so the club couldn't find me – they had to call friends and send a driver to pick me up. People were rushing about, because it was a big fee for the club [around £2.8 million], but I wanted to wait until I'd finished my holiday. I went back to Sofia with a change of clothes and flew to Scotland the next day. Young Stan was on his way!

Why didn't things work out at Celtic for John Barnes, the man who signed you?
I couldn't understand much of what was going on, due to the language barrier, but there was always fighting. I could see little cliques and problems. He couldn't control the dressing room as there were some very powerful characters. It was John's first job since retiring as a player, and a big one for him. The team was winning, but we had many internal issues. The players weren't giving everything for him. Sometimes a job can come a bit too early for someone, but that doesn't mean they're a bad manager.

How did Martin O'Neill turn it around so fast, winning a treble in his first season?
He was clear about what he wanted. He took the players he needed from the previous era – the ones with character, fire and quality – and built his own team. He brought in Alan Thompson, Chris Sutton, Neil Lennon, Bobo Balde, Joos Valgaeren – huge players for us. Martin knew how to build a team of warriors. We didn't fear anyone; we played Barcelona, Lyon and Liverpool, and we weren't scared. Teams feared us when they came to Celtic Park. We had such togetherness and we had winners, and we were hungry for success.

Is there an Old Firm derby that stands out?
All of them were electric, but I remember the 6-2 game well – the first one under O'Neill. In the week leading up to the game, the mood changed. You could see in the players' eyes that something big was building. We looked strong at the start of the season and the boys were all saying we've got something special and we're going for the kill. We were 3-0 up in the first 15 minutes, with the fans going wild. That's when Rangers realised they had to up their game. We had the better of them, but it was a fantastic battle.

Why did you join Aston Villa in 2006?
I always thought I'd remain at Celtic, because it's a special club, but I saw the team was changing and I wanted to compete against the likes of Paul Scholes, Steven Gerrard and Frank Lampard. It was difficult: I needed to upset some Celtic fans. But it was to develop my career. I had to move on.

How close were Villa to qualifying for the Champions League under O'Neill, and why didn't it happen?
We were very close. I remember in one season, he decided to rest us in Europe so we could concentrate on the domestic matches, but we ended up not winning for weeks! We were third, seven points ahead of Arsenal, and we thought we had it, but we eventually finished 10 points behind them. We just had a dip in form. Then, when we saw Martin departing, everything started to go in a different direction and we knew we were getting further away from it.

How do you reflect on Villa's 2010 League Cup Final defeat to Manchester United?
Devastated. I remember, not long ago, the referee from that match said he should have sent off Nemanja Vidic. I'm not a huge fan of VAR, but we needed it then! Those little moments make all the difference on the big stage. As a team, we had everything: quality, speed, character and the fire in us to achieve something. We were close, but couldn't do it.

Were you surprised when Alex McLeish took over as Villa manager after he had just been relegated with Birmingham?
It was a really difficult job for Alex. He came with so much energy and enthusiasm, but the fans never gave him a chance. That was the biggest problem: he knew the odds were stacked against him. He started to become negative. For him, it was more important not to lose the game; he didn't want to give fans an excuse to say he wasn't good enough.

You were diagnosed with leukaemia in 2012. What do you remember of that time?
At the start, I just had a general cold. It never crossed my mind that it could be something like that. I was never ill – I was always so fit and strong. I couldn't understand how I went from being somebody who always pushed others, to being helpless, having to wait for my wife to assist me out of bed. Going from diagnosis to treatment to the outcome was a journey from hell. I had to fight for my life. Nothing prepares you for that. For the first 14 months, my immune system was wiped out so I couldn't meet people – I went to dark places. I didn't want to do the last stage of my treatment. I was exhausted, mentally and physically. It felt like it would never end.

After recovering, you played for a Sunday League team – what was that like?
I loved it. I joined Wychall Wanderers when they were in the second tier of the Over-35s. We went up to the top level and bossed it for three years in a row. The boys weren't happy with me because I put rules in place: we'd meet up for breakfast in the morning and I'd tell them not to drink the night before! We had a formidable side and great characters: Maik Taylor, David Busst, Mark Bellingham – Jude's dad. It was all about the love of football.

Give us your toughest ever opponent.
Steven Gerrard. I always felt I needed extra preparation against him; I had to be smarter, because he was so mobile. As soon as he got a little gap, he'd take a shot and punish you – I had to adjust my game when I came up against him.

CHRIS HUGHTON

"OF COURSE IT WAS UNFAIR OF NEWCASTLE TO FIRE ME, BUT I'D SEEN IT COMING"

The mild-mannered manager recalls his 'shock' Tyneside exit and the real shock of Brighton binning him for Graham Potter

Interview Ian Murtagh

Let's kick things off with your recent role as Ghana's technical director at the 2022 World Cup. Did you enjoy that experience?
I absolutely loved it. I felt incredibly privileged to represent my dad's country 32 years after representing the Republic of Ireland, where my mum's from, at Italia 90. It was a really different role for me, supporting the coach and technical staff, and I'll always look back on the adventure fondly.

You became Ghana boss in February – had you ever been tempted by international management over the years?
I was Brian Kerr's No.2 with the Republic of Ireland for a few years. I'd never received a concrete offer, although there have been rumours and speculation, especially when the Republic job became vacant. Generally, I've always wanted to be a club manager.

Would it be fair to suggest that, after years as a coach, you broke into management almost by accident, as Newcastle gave you the job full-time following caretaker roles?
I'd been a coach at Tottenham for 14 years, filling a variety of roles, and I initially joined Newcastle as Kevin Keegan's assistant. Then I worked with Joe Kinnear and Alan Shearer. It was quite a turbulent time, with managers coming and going and the team suffering relegation, and that summer I was effectively temporary manager. Mike Ashley appointed me full-time only five or six matches into the campaign, after a decent start. So, I suppose you could say that I fell into it, but I'd decided in pre-season that I wanted the job.

Did it feel like a poisoned chalice? The club seemed unmanageable then, with Ashley putting it up for sale and the fans furious.
It helped me that I was a highly experienced coach. I'd been working with footballers ever since hanging up my boots, and I think the powers that be knew I would be a safe pair of hands. Of course it wasn't a great time in Newcastle's history, but I remember looking around the changing room, thinking, 'We've got bloody good players here'. Some were strong personalities – lads like Kevin Nolan, Joey Barton, Alan Smith, Nicky Butt – and it can go either way with characters like that, but they wanted promotion as much as I did.

Newly-promoted Newcastle had made a good start to the Premier League season and recently beaten rivals Sunderland 5-1 when you got the axe in December 2010 – that must have come right out of the blue?
A lot of people – fans and the media – were very surprised, but I wasn't. My contract was expiring at the end of the season and there'd been no indication the club wanted to open talks about a new one, though there was no falling-out – I had good relations with those running the club. Was my sacking unfair? Yes, of course, because we were going well, but I'd be lying if I said I couldn't see it coming.

You've earned a justifiable reputation as a mild-mannered, likeable individual... so, ever fallen out with anyone as a manager?
[*Laughs*] Of course I have. It's impossible not to. But it's important to manage within your personality. There's no point being something you're not. My style is not to go looking for it, but I'm very comfortable with confrontation. So, yes: there are times when you fall out with someone or tell them in no uncertain terms what you think – that's part and parcel of the game. No manager can pussyfoot around in all circumstances, though I do know that I have a reputation as a nice bloke. I like to treat people how I would want to be treated myself, unless they give you a reason not to.

After Newcastle, you had only one season with Birmingham – but a good one, right?
I loved my time at St Andrew's, and I still get Blues telling me it was their favourite season. Birmingham had won the League Cup, so we were in the Europa League, and I couldn't believe the numbers who followed us abroad to back the team. Maybe it all caught up with us, as we lost to Blackpool in the play-offs.

TEAMS
- Tottenham
- West Ham
- Brentford
- Republic of Ireland

TEAMS MANAGED
- Newcastle
- Birmingham
- Norwich
- Brighton
- Nottingham Forest
- Ghana

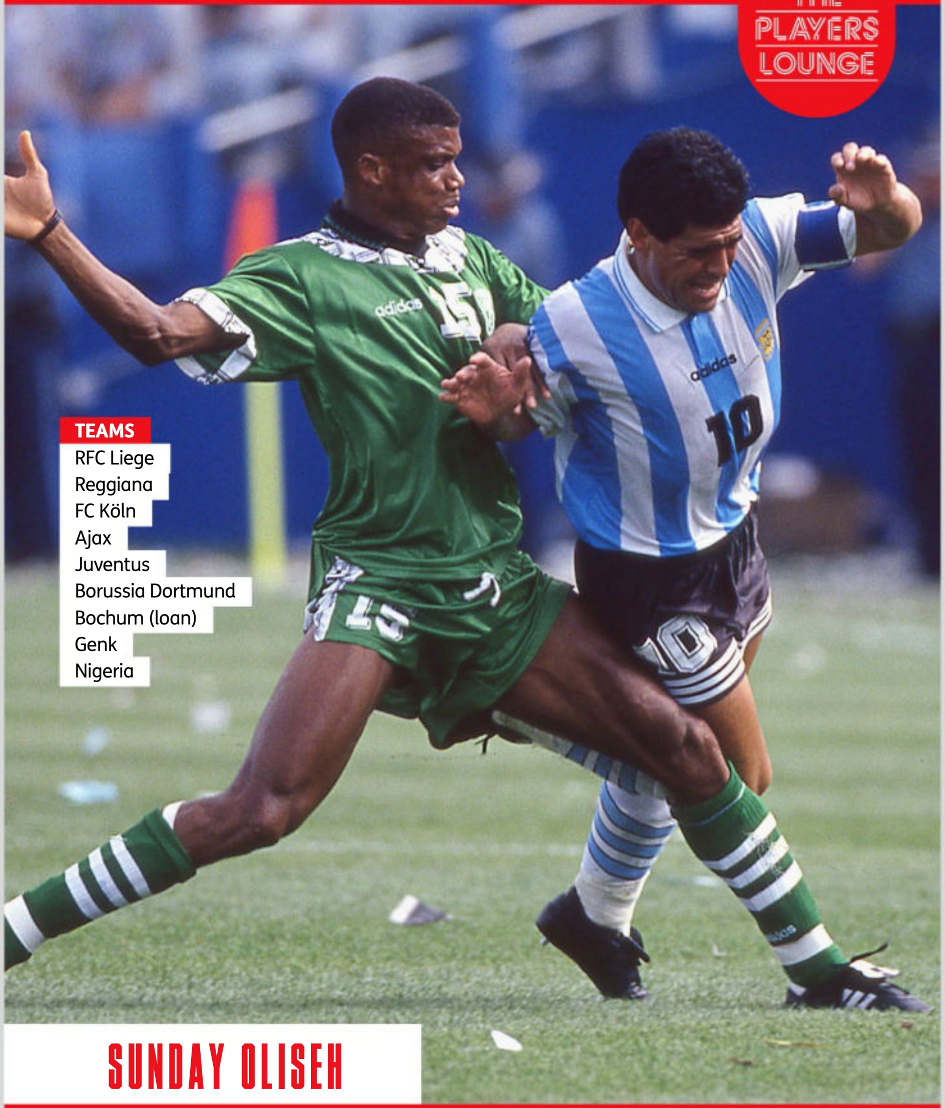
NEWCASTLE
Coca-Cola

Did you enjoy working at Carrow Road?
I only left Birmingham for Norwich because they were in the top flight, where I wanted to be. I inherited a decent squad from Paul Lambert and we did pretty well, finishing 11th in my first season which was a fabulous achievement. I was disappointed to lose my job there, because I felt the board panicked. We were five points clear of the relegation zone and although we had a tough run-in, with four of our last five games against top teams, I felt we would have been fine. But there are no hard feelings – I've been back since and I always receive a warm welcome.

Your longest stint managing one club was at Brighton, where you were in charge for four and a half years. Happy times?
Absolutely. When I arrived they were in the Championship relegation zone, but it didn't feel like a club in a terrible place in terms of morale and players' attitudes. We reached the play-offs 12 months later, only to lose to Sheffield Wednesday. Whenever I'm asked for my proudest achievement, I'll always cite promotion the following year, because the club was in mourning after coming so close. Everyone was so deflated, including myself, but we managed to pick ourselves up and clinch promotion with a few games to spare. That took some doing. We then established ourselves in the Premier League and when I eventually lost my job, I can honestly say it was the last thing I expected. Brighton are a brilliantly-run club, but it came as a nasty shock when they decided to dispense with my services and hire Graham Potter instead.

Your last job in England was at Nottingham Forest – only that didn't last too long...
No, it didn't. It was a really challenging spell. In my first season there, I thought we were quite competitive, but that summer we lost 11 players and another four weren't in my plans. The second new signing came in the day before the first league match and we didn't have the rhythm I was looking for. It wasn't a great time for me, but I must say this: not too many managers could have come in and done the marvellous job that Steve Cooper has done at the City Ground.

Let's go back in time to your playing days, particularly all of those years at Spurs, when you won the FA Cup two seasons running and reached another final. That was some team you played in, wasn't it?
Yes, they were wonderful times, and I was very fortunate to play in two of the greatest cup finals: in 1981, when we won with that Ricky Villa goal, and in 1987, when Coventry beat us against the odds. Both matches are still talked about to this day. That Spurs side was one of the great cup teams and we had world-class players such as Ossie Ardiles and Glenn Hoddle. The FA Cup was magical back then. We even hit the charts with the song *Ossie's Dream* in the build-up to the '81 final. If anybody still has the record sleeve, they'll see that I'm stood right at the front holding the microphone, though that probably had more to do with my size than singing ability!



TEAMS
- RFC Liege
- Reggiana
- FC Köln
- Ajax
- Juventus
- Borussia Dortmund
- Bochum (loan)
- Genk
- Nigeria

SUNDAY OLISEH

"TO STOP MARADONA, YOU HAD TO BE AGGRESSIVE. IF YOU DECIDED TO PLAY CLEAN, YOU HAD NO CHANCE"

The Nigerian destroyer discusses Serie A's glory days, the power of Dortmund fans and winning Olympic gold in 1996

Interview Benjamin McFadyean

Few footballers add an Olympic medal to their trophies – where does Nigeria's gold at the 1996 Games in Atlanta rank for you?
Winning the gold medal in Atlanta was very special for me, as it was for Nigerians back home and all over the world. I'm grateful every single day for my football career and the fantastic clubs I had the chance to play for, but to also be an Olympian and Olympic champion is something I'll always treasure.

You had moved to Reggiana in 1994, from Belgium – what did you make of *calcio*?
I was instantly struck by how competitive a league Serie A was then. During the 1990s, some of the best players were in Italy, such as Zinedine Zidane, Roberto Baggio, Gabriel Batistuta, Paolo Maldini and so many others. It was probably the most competitive league in world football. It was the pinnacle of the beautiful game, so a great start to my career – and it goes without saying that I loved the weather and the food in Italy.

After representing Reggiana and Köln, you signed for Ajax in 1997. How do you reflect on playing with the likes of Jari Litmanen, Edwin van der Sar and the De Boer twins?
I played alongside some greats at Ajax, but few were better than Michael Laudrup. He wasn't just an amazing player; he's also an exceptional human being and totally down to Earth, even with all the success he's had throughout his remarkable career. On the ►

field, the results were very good: we won the title in 1997 and the KNVB Cup twice while I was there. Those two years in Amsterdam went really fast, which is always a good sign.

What did you take from your experience at Juventus, when you moved there from Ajax but played very little before leaving to join Borussia Dortmund a year later?
Playing for Juventus was very special. but it was a challenging time. I only played eight games in total. Turin was a great learning process for me, though. Working alongside players such as Zidane, I learned how to handle relationships with big stars. I played for eight clubs in my career, and you can't expect to feel at home and be a massive success at every one of them. I learnt a lot from my manager, Carlo Ancelotti, especially his emphasis on defending. It's the Italian way and it's effective – we would score first, then sit back and defend that advantage for as long as possible. I borrowed many of his tactics when I was coaching Fortuna Sittard, and a strong defence got us promoted into the first division. I'd be a less effective coach if I hadn't experienced that spell in Turin.

Were Dortmund's fans as special then as they're considered to be now?
The Dortmund fans are phenomenal. You'd come out from the dugout and their energy would bounce off all the stands – the same unique energy as playing for the Nigerian national team. Even so, it was a challenging period for Dortmund. Matthias Sammer was just getting started as a manager, without a wealth of experience to draw upon, and BVB were in a strained financial position. It was a tough introduction to the club.

Yet in just your second season, a Dortmund side with players like Tomas Rosicky, Jan Koller, Jens Lehmann and yourself lifted the Bundesliga title. What was the crucial component of that turnaround?
That was an unbelievable Dortmund team. Sometimes we played with 11 internationals – that says it all. Those guys were very good, but what made that BVB squad special was having the right balance of people, too. We did a lot together away from the club. We'd eat at restaurants or meet up after games, and we became such a close-knit group. The combination of players at the time was right – that's what made the key difference. When things were going badly, everybody had each other's backs because we got on so well. We supported one another. Attack and defence were in harmony, which helped, and the fans were right behind us. Their support made the difference on many occasions.

Having played for three clubs in Germany and two in Italy, how does the football in each country compare?
Well, Dortmund had a special team at the time, with world champions from Italia 90 and a few superstars of the German league. We played a fast-paced, aggressive style and were really hard to break down. But the Bundesliga was exceptional. It was physical, fast and aggressive. In Germany, you had to wake up or teams would walk all over you. It was as simple as that.

You won a domestic double with Ajax and the league title at Dortmund – which ranks higher for you?
Winning the Bundesliga title is something I'd always dreamt about, at Köln and Dortmund, and I got to realise that dream with BVB in 2002, which was unforgettable. Holding up the trophy on the field, and the subsequent pitch invasion from the fans, party with the supporters and parade through the city after receiving my Bundesliga winner's medal was just sensational. Everywhere you looked, you could see people as if you'd cut open a bag of black and yellow rice and it had poured out all over Dortmund. BVB has some of the greatest supporters in the Bundesliga, and to create those wonderful memories with them was something extraordinary. I appreciate every honour that I won in my career, but it's difficult to top my experience at Dortmund.

Your international career was impressive, serving as both a player and a coach with Nigeria's national team. Talk us through your Super Eagles highlights...
Well, my first match was against Ethiopia and we won 6-0. That was special. Playing for Nigeria was always incredible. It's the highlight of any career, getting to represent the national side. You aren't established as a player until you've been called up for your country; especially in Nigeria, you aren't seen as a star. Our supporters are crazy – they all have a great mentality. And when we won a gold medal in Atlanta in 1996, it was the first time an African football team had won one. I'm Nigerian first, before anything else.

You came up against Diego Maradona at USA 94. Do you have special memories of facing him? How did you react to the news of his death in 2020?
It was weird when Maradona passed – I felt strange the whole day. Diego gave so much joy to people during his life, especially to his countrymen. He took football to a whole new level. Playing against him was awesome, and somehow it still hurts when you see images of him, to think that he has gone and at such a young age – just 60. Diego gave everything to the beautiful game.

Did you manage to tackle Maradona at all?
If you decided to play clean against him, you had no chance – he seemed to have eyes in the back of his head. The only way to trouble him was to be aggressive. Despite his stature, he had superb ability: one slight movement and he was gone. Diego was special like few other players have been.

TONY DORIGO

"MY BOSS AT VILLA DIDN'T LET ME PLAY FOR AUSTRALIA, SO ENGLAND CALLED ME UP INSTEAD. I MADE THE BEST OF IT..."

The reluctant international and Leeds title winner talks Italia 90 and King Eric's aura

Interview Sean Cole

Why did you never play for Australia?
It was difficult – I ended up feeling I had no choice. Australia asked about my availability when I was 18; they wanted me to go Down Under and play against the likes of Fiji and Samoa. I went to see Tony Barton, the Aston Villa manager, and explained all of this to him and said I'd love to play for Australia. He basically told me, "No, you're not doing it". The international calendars weren't aligned and there was no legal requirement for the club to release me. The power wasn't with the players then. I was really disappointed, but I simply got on with my job at Villa Park.

How did you feel about playing for England when you had no family ties to the country? What was the response like from the press and fellow players?
After qualifying for citizenship, England were keen for me to get a British passport and play for them. It was strange – the press always referred to me as 'the Aussie-born England player', but the boys were brilliant. The longer I've lived in England, the more I've felt part of things. It wasn't the perfect situation, but everyone to do with England was incredibly welcoming. I made the best of it. Of course, you never quite lose your Aussie accent, and I never will. It's nice to retain that.

What did you make of Bobby Robson?
He was wonderful. If he said to run through a brick wall, you'd give it a go. He believed in you and gave you confidence. He got names wrong and it somehow made you like him even more! We had some right tales on the training ground. He was great – a character, experienced and a passionate Englishman who wanted everyone to do extremely well.

Even if you didn't get to feature until the third-place play-off, was it special to be a part of England's 1990 World Cup squad?
It was amazing how things clicked into place. We didn't start well but changing formation worked, we kept going, and it got better and better. It was a fantastic journey. We didn't quite realise how big of an effect it had until we flew home and suddenly we were on this open-top bus. It was nuts. I was a substitute for the semi-final and down to take a penalty if I came on. To go out was just dreadful, but fortunately I played in the final game against Italy. My mum and dad were there watching. It was surreal – I was living the dream.

You scored the winning goal for Chelsea in the final of the Full Members' Cup in 1990. What are your memories?
Growing up in Oz, I dreamed of scoring the winning goal at Wembley. It wasn't quite the FA Cup final, but there was a 76,000-crowd there and it was unbelievable. Chelsea fans back then weren't used to the success they have today, so they certainly remember it. I still have Middlesbrough fans coming up to me, saying I ruined their childhood! The passion is just brilliant – that's what it's all about. Winning Division Two by a long way made the previous season very special, too.

Why did you move to Leeds in 1991?
Chelsea were still achieving decent league positions but I thought there was something stopping us from succeeding, so I wanted to look at my options when my contract ran out. I was going away with England and planned to speak to clubs when I got back. Suddenly, out of nowhere, Leeds came in and Howard Wilkinson rang me. I said, "I'll see you when I get back." Howard said, "No, you're coming here right now." I headed there before I went away and it was great. He sold me the vision of what they were trying to do.

What were the key factors in your 1991-92 title triumph with Leeds?
It was one heck of a season. Howard brought together a superb group of players. We had a great leader in Gordon Strachan, and two of the best youngsters around in David Batty and Gary Speed. We had a lot of experience, with John Lukic in goal and Chris Fairclough at centre-half. Gary McAllister was first class in midfield. The whole blend was there. We were organised, we were a really tight group, standards were extremely high, the Elland Road faithful powered us on when we got on a roll – we didn't lose at home that season – and mentally, we finished off the strongest.

Why did Leeds struggle so badly after that title win, finishing 17th the next season?
That was tough. Initially, we never quite got to grips with the backpass rule, which didn't set us off to a good start. And obviously, as champions, you have a target on your back as well. It was strange, because away from home we were just dreadful and it became a mental problem, but at home we were still strong. It didn't make much sense.

What was Eric Cantona like at Elland Road, before he went on to be a pivotal figure in Manchester United's success?
I'd played against Cantona with the England Under-21s a few years earlier: we drew 2-2 at Highbury and he scored twice, so I knew about him and his reputation. At Leeds, he was outstanding. He was very professional and quiet – still trying to learn the language. But the way that Howard expected his players to play, and make sacrifices for the good of the team, didn't quite fit with Eric. When he went to Manchester United, he was like the Pied Piper. He was terrific. I knew he had that sort of talent, but couldn't have foreseen him having such a huge impact. Clearly, he found a home that was just perfect for him.

Why did your own time with Leeds come to an end in 1997?
My injuries were a big frustration. Every time I got back playing, I'd do my hamstring again – I must have pulled it four or five times. I had various issues that we never really got on top of. If I was fit, I would play, but sadly I wasn't most of the time. I'd love to have stayed at Elland Road. Leeds offered me a contract but, because of the injuries, it wasn't particularly attractive and I had to look elsewhere. I was heading to Middlesbrough, actually, when Graeme Souness and Torino came in for me. I fancied an Italian adventure.

How did the experience of playing in Italy compare to English football?
It was excellent. I'd like to have gone there at my peak, not on a downward spiral with injuries, but they looked after me really well. I had a massage every morning and again straight after training. I did stretches and strength exercises. They designed a whole programme specifically for me. That's the norm in England these days, but back then it certainly wasn't. Serie B was a very technical league, and the mentality was different – the tactics and how to prepare. I soaked it all up. It was a great education. Things went well, but I missed the vital penalty in the play-off that meant we didn't go up to Serie A. That would have been the dream, but it was still a wonderfully enriching year.

Why did you leave Italy after only a year?
I had a two-year contract and the second year was worth quite a lot of money. Because we weren't promoted, they decided not to go ahead with it. Unfortunately I thought it was guaranteed, so I ended up in court after suing my agent – I won, but it was messy. That was a real shame, because if I'd scored and we'd gone up, I probably would have stayed there and had a great end to my career in Serie A.

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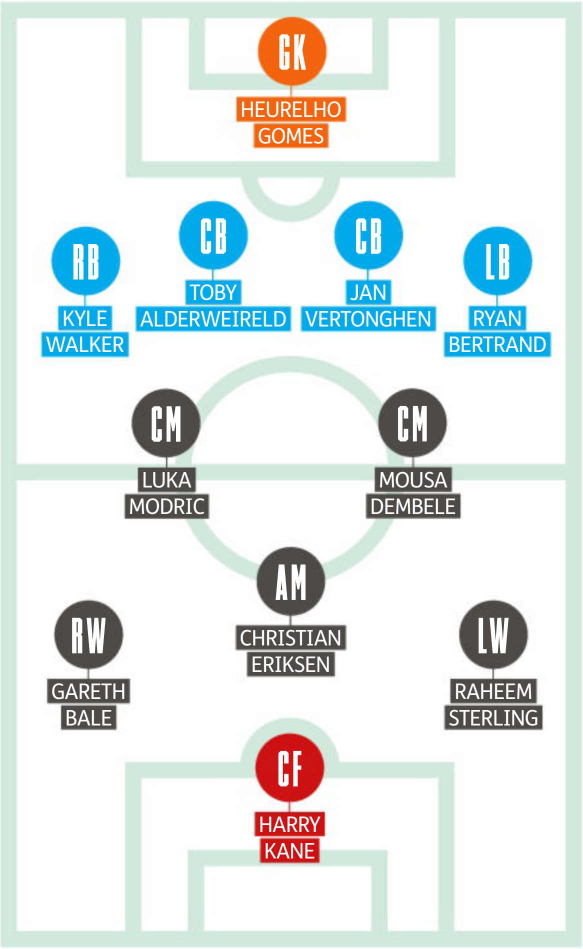
MY PERFECT XI

DANNY ROSE

The left-back earned 29 England caps but opts for a Spursy side in picking a dream team of his former team-mates – though there is room for a current Chelsea star…



THE GAFFER

MAURICIO POCHETTINO
"The best boss I worked with and my favourite as a person, too. I have so much to thank him for. He made me and many others into better players – that's what you need from the coach."

THE SUBS

01 **HUGO LLORIS**

02 **LEDLEY KING**

03 **DELE ALLI**

HEURELHO GOMES
"He and Hugo Lloris were among the finest goalkeepers I've played with, but as a shot-stopper Gomes was something else. Today, teams want to see how good keepers are on the ball – which is brilliant – but back when I was playing, Heurelho was unbelievable."

KYLE WALKER
"No debate: the best right-back I've played with. Kyle will go down as a Premier League great. He looks like he isn't slowing down, in terms of pace and the performances that he still puts in, which is so impressive."

TOBY ALDERWEIRELD
"I only got to play a handful of matches with Ledley King, so I'm not sure it'd be fair to pick him even though he's unquestionably one of England's elite. However, I spent many years alongside Toby, and he was just so consistent for such a long period of time that it's tough to overlook him."

JAN VERTONGHEN
"Spurs' most entertaining football in recent years, and for as long as many people can remember, had a backbone of Alderweireld and Vertonghen. Obviously I played to the side of Jan, and his positioning guided me through games. I enjoyed playing with him."

RYAN BERTRAND
"Ryan was underrated for England. We were both competing for the left-back spot in the national team, and he was the best left-back I shared a dressing room with."

LUKA MODRIC
"I feel very lucky to have played with Luka. When he joined Spurs, he was playing off the left wing – that was before Gareth Bale burst on to the scene. Then, when Bale took over the left side, Luka started playing in the middle, so whatever you've seen from Luka at Madrid was exactly what he was doing in Spurs training all those years ago. And that's Real – imagine how easy it must have been for him at Spurs."

MOUSA DEMBELE
"He was a monster – technically superb and impossible to get the ball off. Mousa played football as if he was out in the street, which is how you should always play. He never took it too seriously. I don't think I'll come across a footballer like him again."

GARETH BALE
"He had the best left foot I've ever seen – it was like a wand. And at one point, before he had a hard time due to injuries, he was the top athlete around. He had blistering pace. There won't be many players with a better goal reel than Gareth's – strikes from outside the box, bicycle kicks, free-kicks… incredible."

CHRISTIAN ERIKSEN
"I used to call him 'The Maestro'. He was the best £11 million signing you'll find anywhere, with his left and right foot, set-pieces, weight of passing, ability to dictate a game… not to mention he could run all day long. And, most importantly, he scored important goals for Tottenham and created important chances."

RAHEEM STERLING
"I played with Raheem for England when he was on the left wing, but I also had plenty of battles against him at club level and he got the better of me more than once – I have no shame in admitting that. I'm a huge fan of his and it's crazy to think that he's still only 28 years old."

HARRY KANE
"I've played with a few fantastic strikers, but Kane [left] was frightening. Harry's heading, goalscoring and penalty record are simply phenomenal, and he has the professionalism, ambition and hunger to match. I just hope he wins some silverware – and at Tottenham. He'll overtake Alan Shearer's Premier League goal record, and it'd be great if he also bagged a trophy or two."

Ryan Dabbs

Danny was speaking courtesy of BT Sport, who have exclusive rights to UK Champions League coverage

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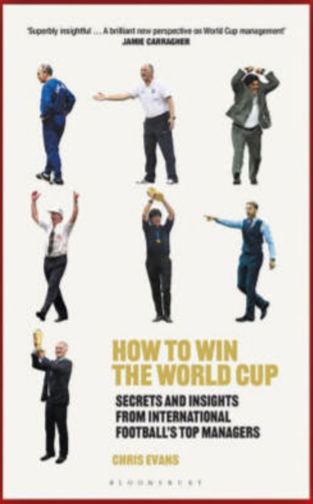
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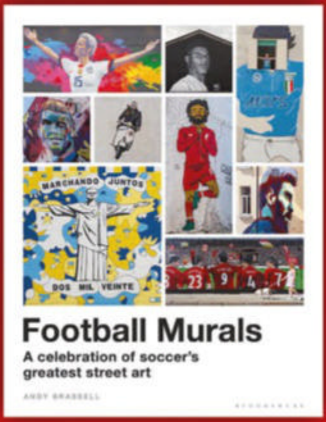
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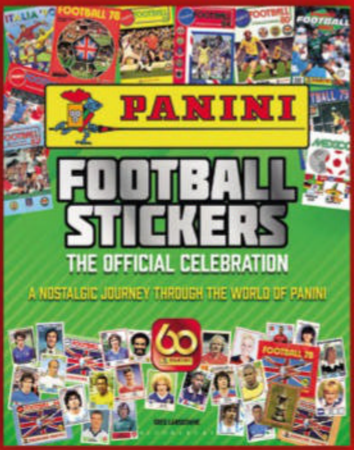
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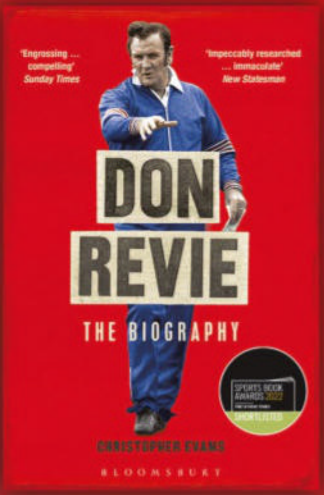
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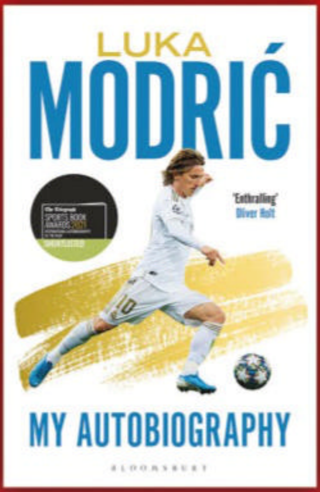
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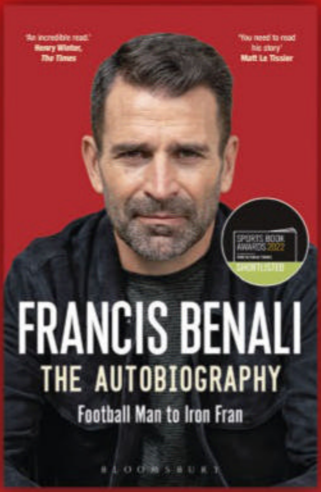
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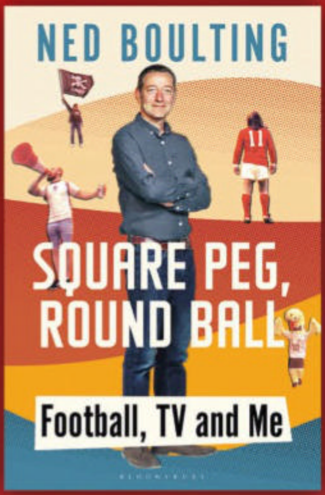
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